WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN'S

TERY MAGAZINE

MAY 1990
$2.25 U.S.
$2.75 CAN.

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Ellery
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Ross Thomas
(see page 122)

PLUS
10
GRIPPING
STORIES

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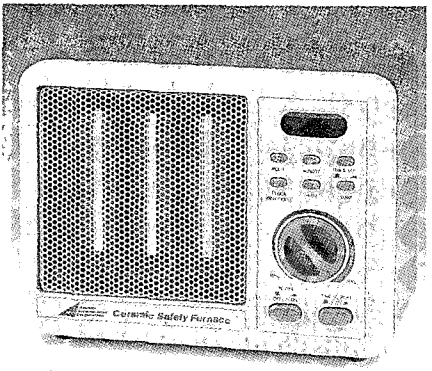
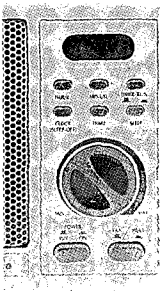
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ FIGHT THE BIG CHILL



Be toasty warm whenever, wherever you want! The Timer, from Aladdin is the safe, compact, energy efficient 1500 watt ceramic heater that really does fight the big chill. Extremely safe (the heating element actually operates below the ignition point of tissue paper), the unit provides instant heat for any room. Plus, it is the only portable heater which features an easy to use programmable timer. So, you can set it once, and enjoy warm mornings while the unit runs for two hours, then shuts itself off. The ingenious "sleep" button lets you fall asleep in warmth, then shuts itself off in an hour. Compact (9"x7"x5") and lightweight, the *Timer* provides 2,250 BTU's of heat and features an automatic temperature sensor and a year round fan. The illuminated digital clock displays hour / minutes, and current settings. The automatic tipover safety switch is an added safety feature. So stop wasting energy and money warming rooms not in use, and fight the big chill with the safe, economical, Timer. UL listed. Manufacturer's 5 yr. limited warranty. **$159.98** ($10.00) #A1961.



◄ FOOD DEHYDRATOR

Even if it weren't so specially low-priced, this food dehydrator would be immensely economical. Using almost none of your valuable time, it makes nutritious, preservative-free, refined-sugar free, *healthful* dried fruits and snacks, plus yogurt — at a tiny fraction of their price in stores. Simply slice fruit into lemon juice, spread on the perforated plastic stacking trays and forget it for 12 to 24 hours. With electrical coil at bottom, the unit is engineered for convection heating; no fan needed, so it's energy-efficient and noiseless. A 28-page instruction book provides guides for adjustable vents and timing plus enticing recipes. Treat kids to crispy banana chips, make dried apples, apricots, raisins...even beef jerkey and vegetables for soups and camping trips... try zucchini slices with sesame seeds — a dieter's dream substitute for hi-cal chips. U.L. Listed. 5-tray Dehydrator (shown) **$51.98** ($6.25) #A1887X. 3-tray Dehydrator **$41.98** ($5.25) #A1886X

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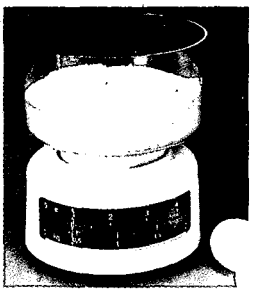
▼ IT SWIVELS!

Backless "Back" Chairs have solved the age-old problem of proper seating, aligning the body on its natural axis so that sitting does not stress spine or back muscles. The redistribution of body weight is dramatically more freeing, natural, comfortable. But until now you had to give up mobility to sit this intelligently — these chairs were unidirectional and if you needed to change orientation you had the awkwardness of moving the whole chair. Finally it swivels! In its brand-new swivel incarnation, the Back Chair is suited for use at any work station, desk or table. The reinforced oak 4-star base has commercial-quality dual-track casters for easy maneuverability over carpets or floors. Effortless swivel action. Manual height adjustment. Gray poly-cotton fabric over plush cushion. This is a new twist on a good idea and until you use it you don't know how relaxed and productive you can be sitting down. The price is a nice turn too, only **$79.98** ($13.00) #A1816. Minimal assembly.

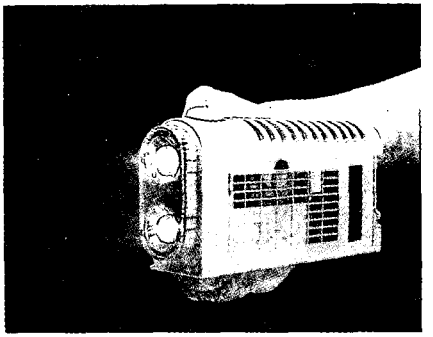
▼ ZERO RESET SCALE



Convenience was costly until Mouli introduced this scale. Easiest to use. Now you do not have to keep emptying the bowl, just keep adding your ingredients and set the bottom back to zero. Has a 7 PD capacity. Dishwasher safe. The bowl inverts over scale for easy storage. **$19.98** ($5.00) #A1904.

▼ AWAKE N ' ESCAPE

This doubly useful smoke detector not only sounds the alarm, but can literally light the way to safety. Designed for the top of a door, its swingaway bracket with lock lever slips on doors up to 2". When combustion activates the alarm, a built-in double-beam flashlight comes on automatically — indicating the door's location. Then, one pull and the breakaway bracket releases the unit to serve as a portable flashlight. Use both at home and in hotel rooms; a packable 8½" x 5½" x 2¼". Dual-ionization-chamber type, with alarm test button and low-battery signal. Two 9-volt batteries included; 5-year ltd. warranty. **$40.98** ($5.00) #A1932.



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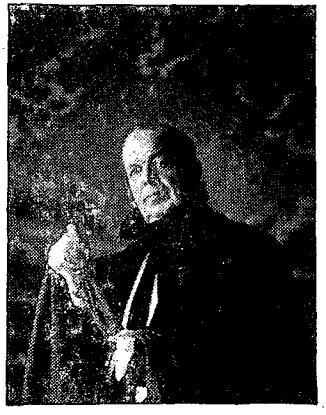

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ROSS THOMAS

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Note: indicia on page 159

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Some people around here, like old man Frankfurt, think Hitler would be good for the German people," Bill Crawley told Dr. Sam. "I heard him say he's giving them back the sense of pride they lost after their defeat in the war."

"That's rubbish," said Dr. Sam. He had no liking for Rudolph Frankfurt, a paranoid little man who lived behind an electrified fence and locked doors, guarded by a dog, in the belief that an American anti-Nazi element was out to kill him . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE PROTECTED FARMHOUSE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Toward the end of the summer of '35, there was an unusual murder in Northmont," Dr. Sam Hawthorne began, warming to his subject before he'd even finished pouring the traditional libation. "I know I've told you about a lot of unusual murders over the years, but this one struck me as especially bizarre. It occurred in a farmhouse that was completely unapproachable—a true fortress. As it turned out, the method of murder wasn't nearly as bizarre as the motive behind it."

I'd been making my weekly rounds (Dr. Sam continued) to the few rural patients who still needed house calls, and I'd made a special point of stopping off at the Crawley house. Young Bill Crawley's hay fever was especially bad at that time of year, but there was little I could do for him beyond prescribing one of the new antihistamines just coming on the market. I was mainly interested in

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the progress of his training for the '36 Olympics to be held in Berlin the following summer. He was the first Northmont resident ever to have a chance at the Olympic team and we were cheering him on.

Bill was a slender, muscular lad of nineteen who'd just completed his first year at Boston University. He'd be going back in a week as a sophomore, and I suppose I was especially interested in his career because he'd mentioned his interest in some pre-med courses. He was a hard worker, whatever he did, and he'd spent the summer, when he wasn't training, working at Kasper's Kennel, cleaning up after the dogs. His parents, Amy and Charles, were proud of Bill, just as they were of his older sister, who was about to enter her final year at Skidmore.

"How's it going?" I called out from the car toward the field next to the house, where Bill was practicing high jumps on a sandy track he'd constructed.

"Fine, Doc," Bill replied, brushing himself off as he strolled over. "I'm right up to the mark."

I got out of the car and walked over to shake hands. "How long before they pick the track-and-field team?"

"Not till the spring, but I've got a good chance." He smiled. "My folks have got the money all saved up."

"Berlin is a long way from here, Bill. Some people say Hitler may be starting a war."

"Not before the Olympics, he won't. I've been reading about it. He wants the Germans to win everything and prove the superiority of the master race."

"Fat chance of that."

"I don't know, Doc. Some people around here, like old man Frankfurt, think Hitler will be good for the German people. I heard him say he's giving them back the sense of pride they lost after their defeat in the war."

"That's rubbish," I told him. I had no liking for Rudolph Frankfurt, a paranoid little man who lived behind an electrified fence and locked doors, guarded by a dog, in the belief that an American anti-Nazi element was out to kill him. But there was no point in pursuing unpleasant subjects. "How are your folks?" I asked him.

"Fine. Dad's gone into town for some wood."

Charles Crawley was a carpenter, much in demand among Northmont's homeowners trying to keep things together in the face of the Depression. Although his work provided a reasonably steady income,

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it was still a wonder that he'd been able to save enough to send his son off to the Olympics.

"Give them my best, will you?" I said. As I was getting back into the car, I asked, "The hay fever bothering you much?"

"Not today. It comes and goes."

"Good—maybe you're growing out of it. I've had patients who have, you know." As I drove away, I could see him strolling back to the sandy track to continue his practice.

My route back to town took me right by Frankfurt's farmhouse fortress, as Sheriff Lens liked to call it. It was the old Muller place, with fields unworked in a decade, but folks still thought of it as a farm and resented Frankfurt's decision to let it stand idle. The little man seemed to have no gainful employment, which led to the wildest of notions. Some said he was a spy or a member of the Bund, planted here by Hitler himself for the day when America and Germany would again be at war.

I didn't worry much about those stories. Rudy Frankfurt was no friend of mine, but he was an occasional patient and he'd always been civil enough. I thought the fence and dog and locked doors made him more of a victim than an enemy, and certainly no one to be feared.

Driving past that day, I slowed down at the locked gate, noticing a car parked behind the bushes across the road. There was someone in it, and that seemed odd, but I hardly gave it a second thought. The flag on Frankfurt's mailbox, mostly invisible from the waiting car, was down. No mail today, unless it had been picked up already. I'd been hoping to spot Frankfurt in the yard, if only to confirm that his health was good. He had no telephone to summon me if he needed a house call, though he was in pretty good shape for a man of fifty-one. I stopped by the mailbox and got out for a moment, walking back to check that the gate was really locked. I glanced at the curtained windows of the house some hundred feet away, then walked back to my car and got in.

There was the beep of a horn behind me and Paul Nolan went by, driving his delivery truck from Spiggins' Grocery. We exchanged waves as he kept going, throwing up a trail of dust from the dry roadbed. I smiled and shook my head, remembering Sheriff Lens' complaints about young Paul driving too fast on the back roads. Seeing him reminded me that I had to stop at the grocery myself. I'd promised my nurse, Mary Best, that I'd pick up some oranges

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and eggs to save her a stop on the way home. The old general stores had passed from the scene in Northmont. They'd been replaced by the more specific grocery and hardware and feed stores, and big Mike Spiggins had been in the right place at the right time. The Depression hadn't hurt him a bit, because people always had to eat.

Paul's delivery truck was already in its parking place next to the store when I pulled in. I drew a line with my finger through the coat of dust on its side as I walked into the grocery and picked up one of the wicker baskets Mike kept near the entrance for his customers. Picking up the oranges and eggs for Mary and some bread and milk for myself, I carried the basket up to the cash register.

Mike Spiggins glanced up from a note he was reading. "What do you make of this, Doc? It came in the mail from Rudy Frankfurt. He wants some groceries delivered an' he even sent along the key to the front gate."

"I just passed his place and didn't see any sign of him," I said. I took the note and read the handwritten shopping list of a dozen or so items on a sheet of beige paper with Frankfurt's name and address printed at the top. Beneath the list was typewritten CAR LAID UP. PLEASE DELIVER. USE KEY FOR FRONT GATE. BEWARE OF DOG.

"He's left me lists like this before, while he shopped in town," Spiggins worried, "but he never mailed me one along with his key. Maybe he's sick. Why else couldn't he come down and open the gate himself?"

"That's a good question," I said, remembering the strange car I'd seen parked across the street from the farmhouse.

Paul Nolan came out of the storeroom carrying a carton. He was a gawky young man who'd graduated from high school with Bill Crawley. His folks didn't have the money to send him to college, so he'd gotten a job at the grocery. "Where do you want the chicken soup, Mr. Spiggins?" he called out.

"Put it there in the corner. I'll shelve it later. We got an order here from Rudy Frankfurt. Came in the mail. You got time to run it up there later today?"

"Sure, Mr. Spiggins."

"What time will that be?" I asked. "Maybe I should follow you out, Paul—see if he's all right."

He thought for a moment and then shrugged. "Around four?"

"I'll be back then," I told him.

The whole business seemed strange to me, and I was more concerned than ever about the man I'd seen watching Frankfurt's farm-

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house. I wondered if there really was something wrong with his car or if he was just afraid to come out. Of course, he must have come as far as the gate to leave the letter in his box for the postman to pick up.

I was passing Grayson's, the only decent garage in town, and decided to stop. "Heard anything about Frankfurt's car?" I asked when the mechanic slid out from under a Buick he was working on. His name was Tyler and he had thick black hair on his arms.

"Sure—it's all ready. He hasn't picked it up yet, though."

"What was wrong with it?"

"Trouble with the gear shift."

"When did he bring it in?"

"Two days ago. Wednesday afternoon around four."

If Frankfurt's car was ready, I wondered why he couldn't pick it up and then go for his own groceries. Of course, he had no phone, so maybe he didn't know it was ready. I thought about that as I drove back to my office, enjoying the cool sunshine of a New England afternoon at summer's end.

Mary saw me pull into my parking space and came out to meet me. She looked as attractive and efficient as ever, but the slight flush of her cheeks warned me that something was wrong. "I was hoping you'd get back, Sam. There's a patient waiting to see you."

"Who's that?"

"Gretchen Pratt, the girl Bill Crawley's been going out with."

I was hardly one to keep up with the town's latest teenage romances, but I did know the Pratt girl. She'd graduated from high school with Bill Crawley and was often out at his folks' place while he trained for his shot at the Olympics. Apparently they'd remained friendly even during his year away at college. "What's the matter with her?" I asked.

"She thinks she may be pregnant. She's very upset."

Mary hadn't exaggerated. As soon as I saw the girl's tear-stained face I knew she was really suffering. "Hello, Gretchen." I patted her shoulder. "Tell me about it."

Through her tears, I finally got the whole story—of her deep love for Bill and her missed period and the terrible effect this might have on his chances for the Olympics.

"Does Bill know about it?" I asked her.

"Not yet. I don't know how to tell him."

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"Well, let's do some tests first and make sure it's true. You may be worrying over nothing."

She was a pretty blonde girl who'd been a cheerleader in high school. Like so many in her class, she hadn't gone on to college but had taken a job instead. Hers, at a local insurance agency, I knew didn't pay well, and in a town like Northmont all she had to look forward to was marriage to some local boy. Most girls would have jumped at the chance of trapping Bill Crawley into walking down the aisle, but she was too decent for that. She was thinking only of Bill, and of how this new life might affect his future. While I examined her, she even murmured something about an abortion, but I chose to ignore that.

"We'll know tomorrow," I said finally, labeling the test tube.

"Not until then?"

"It takes time. We have to inject a sample of your urine into a rabbit. If the rabbit's ovaries show signs of pregnancy, the test is positive. Fortunately, the hospital lab in this building keeps rabbits for the A-Z test. Otherwise we'd have to send your specimen away."

"Why do they call it that? Because it's the start and finish?"

"It's not the finish of anything, Gretchen," I told her. "The test is named for a pair of German doctors who developed it—Aschheim and Zondek."

She stood up. "Will you call me as soon as you know?"

"Either Mary or I will call you."

She left the office with a downcast expression that could have broken your heart. I wanted to make it right for her, make her an innocent child again, but that wasn't something I could do.

"How did it go?" Mary asked me.

"How do you think? Did you see that look on her face? Take this over to the hospital lab for an A-Z. I have to ride out to Rudy Frankfurt's place."

"What's wrong with *him?*"

I had to smile at her tone.

"Nothing, I hope," I said.

As I pulled up behind Spiggins' Grocery, Paul Nolan was pitching a stone at a stray mutt sniffing around his truck. He had all Frankfurt's groceries in a single cardboard box which he placed in the open back of the truck next to a roll of canvas and a set of golf clubs.

"You stop for a few holes at the Country Club?" I asked him.

"The town course is more my speed," he said. "I was afraid that

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mutt was going to grab one of them. He's always around here for handouts. Mr. Spiggins called Kasper's Kennel, but they haven't come after him yet." The kennel served as the town's dogcatcher in addition to supplying trained police dogs like the big German shepherd at Rudy Frankfurt's place.

"Are you going to deliver those now?"

"Yeah. You comin' along?"

"I'll follow in my car."

"I'd like to drive one of them sometime," he said, nodding toward my red Mercedes.

"Go to medical school," I suggested. The car was one of the few luxuries of my bachelor existence.

I stayed well behind him on the drive out to Frankfurt's place, mainly to avoid the cloud of dust he raised from the road. He stopped at the gate and got out with the key. As he jiggled the metal barrier to make sure it was locked before inserting the key to open it, I happened to glance across the road at the clump of bushes. A car was parked there once more, but it was a different one. The watcher had changed from a blue Dodge to a tan Chevy.

I turned off the ignition and got out, striding purposefully toward the Chevy. For the first time, I could make out the man inside, leaning back in the seat with a fedora covering his brow as if he were asleep. I jerked open the unlocked door on the passenger side. "Maybe I can help you find what you're looking for," I told him.

He glared at me from under the fedora and flipped open a leather case to show me a small gold badge and an identification card. All I had time to see were the words, Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Get out of here, buddy. Keep driving," he said.

"I'm a doctor," I told him. "I'm going in there."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing that I know of. I'm just checking on him."

Paul Nolan had closed the gate without locking it and was proceeding up the road in his delivery truck. Almost at once the German shepherd was after him, barking and growling as he nipped at the tires. The federal agent laughed. "Better go rescue that kid."

I agreed and hurried to the gate, pushing it open wide enough to admit my car. As I passed through the gate the dog seemed to grow confused at this wealth of targets. He turned his attention to me, chasing down the road to intercept me and leaving the delivery truck free to pull out of sight around the corner of the garage.

I paused a while to keep the dog occupied while Paul got the

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groceries inside, but after a few minutes Paul appeared around the garage, motioning to me. "He's not answering the bell, Doc."

"Maybe he's not home," I said. As I left the car, the German shepherd started for me. I slipped off my coat and was wrapping it around my arm for protection when Paul ran up with a double handful of dry dogfood.

"He could be just hungry," he suggested, tossing it on the ground. "Spiggins ordered two big bags of it."

Indeed that seemed to be the case. The dog ceased his attack and fell upon the food instead. I sighed with relief and followed Paul back to the side door of the house.

"The door's locked and he doesn't answer," he told me.

I peered in at the window, seeing something that sent a familiar shiver down my spine. "Stand back—I'm going to break the glass."

"What?"

"There's a body in there, on the floor."

During the hours that followed, we established that Rudy Frankfurt had been killed by repeated blows on the head with an axe handle found near the body. He'd been dead somewhere between thirty-six and forty-eight hours, which meant Wednesday evening or Thursday morning. Somehow I wasn't surprised when Sheriff Lens completed his inspection of the house and returned with the word that all doors and windows were locked tight.

"What about the fence?" I asked him.

"That, too, Doc. The current is on full force in that electric wire along the top. Nobody got over that one."

"A locked gate, a seven-foot-high electrified fence, a guard dog, and a house with all its doors and windows locked. It's impossible."

Sheriff Lens shifted the belt over his stomach. "You've had tough ones before, Doc. What do you want me to do?"

I thought about that. "Frankfurt was alive Wednesday afternoon when he brought his car to the garage. Either he walked back here or he got a ride. See what you can find out from the garage man." As an afterthought, I added, "And the postman who delivers his mail."

"Huh?"

"He wrote a note to Mike Spiggins and sent his gate key along so the groceries could be delivered. Maybe the postman can remember picking up that letter from his box by the gate."

"What are you going to do?"

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I suddenly remembered there was one other witness, perhaps the best witness of all. "Come with me for a few minutes, Sheriff."

As it turned out, we didn't need to walk down the road to the gate for a confrontation with the federal agent. I opened the door and there he was, fedora and all.

"What's going on here?" he asked, showing his identification once more.

Sheriff Lens peered down at the name. "Special Agent Steven Bates. What can I do for you, sir?"

"Are you the sheriff here?"

"That's right."

"We've had this house under surveillance for the past two days. It's a matter of national security."

"I guess you'll have to be more specific than that."

The agent eyed the sheriff with growing irritation. "What's happened here?" he demanded.

"Man named Rudy Frankfurt has been murdered, sometime within the past couple of days."

I interrupted with a question. "There are two of you watching the house, aren't there? I saw another car earlier."

Bates turned toward me. "Who are you?"

"Dr. Sam Hawthorne. I found the body."

He nodded. "You came over to my car earlier."

"I'd noticed two different cars parked in the bushes. It looked suspicious."

"We suspect that Rudolph Frankfurt may have had some connection with an organization called the German-American Volksbund. They're meeting somewhere in rural New England this weekend, and my partner and I were assigned to watch this place. There are other teams at other locations." He addressed his explanation to Sheriff Lens, ignoring me.

"We've never had any trouble like that here," the sheriff said, scratching his head. "There've been stories about Frankfurt from time to time, but nothing criminal."

"Have you found any weapons in the house?"

"One hunting rifle, nothing else. We found lots of food, even three bags of dogfood in the garage, but no guns, no phone, nothing mechanical."

"I think my partner and I better take over that aspect of the case. I can call and have him here in fifteen minutes."

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"No telephone," Sheriff Lens told him again.

"What?"

"Frankfurt didn't have a telephone. He was something of a hermit. He went into town only when he had to, lived behind this electric fence with a guard dog."

I stretched my luck by interrupting again. "If you and your partner have been here for two days, you must have seen the killer."

He turned toward me again. "We took up our station at five P.M. Wednesday afternoon. No one's entered or left since then."

Sheriff Lens sighed. "Where does that leave us, Doc?"

"I'm not quite sure," I said. "Why don't you check with that postman? I'll talk to the garage man again."

Then we had to step aside while they carried Rudy Frankfurt's body out of the house.

As soon as I arrived at my office on Saturday morning, I telephoned Gretchen Pratt with the news. "The A-Z test was positive, Gretchen."

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line, but when she spoke her voice was reasonably controlled. "I didn't really doubt it," she said.

"What about Bill?"

"I told him last night. I was that certain what the result would be."

"How did he take it?"

"I don't know. He was quiet, thoughtful."

"Could you both come in to see me this afternoon? It might help to talk this over before you tell your parents."

"What if Bill won't come?"

"We're pretty good friends. Ask him to take an hour off from training."

"All right, Doctor."

Mary was standing in the doorway when I hung up. "You're here early for a Saturday."

"I got the lab results and I wanted to phone Gretchen Pratt."

"Positive?"

I nodded. "She took it pretty well. I asked her to come in this afternoon with the Crawley boy." I shook my head. "They're so young to be parents, Mary."

"Nineteen. My sister was married at nineteen. They're doing fine."

"He's supposed to start his second year of college next week. He's training for the Olympics next summer."

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She sat down in the patients' chair. "What I want to hear about is the murder. Rudy Frankfurt bludgeoned to death with an axe handle?"

"That seems to be it. I haven't checked the autopsy results yet."

"That place is like a fortress. How did the killer get in?"

I drew up my yellow pad and started making notes, as much to clarify my own thinking as to answer her question. "The last person to see Rudy alive other than his killer was the garage man—that fellow named Tyler. He says Frankfurt brought his car in around four and then left, alone, to walk back to his farm. That walk would have taken him about thirty minutes. He needed groceries, including dogfood, but obviously he didn't want to carry them. When he arrived home, he wrote out a list, enclosed his gate key, and mailed it to Spiggins', leaving the envelope in the box at his gate. Starting at five that afternoon, two FBI agents were watching that gate, and nobody came or went."

"So he was killed *before* five?"

"I don't know. That supposes one of two possibilities. First, that he returned home to catch the killer inside his house, intent on robbery. But that's unlikely because how would the killer have gotten over the fence, past the dog, and into the house?"

"What kind of dog is it?"

"A trained German shepherd, purchased from Kasper's Kennel two months ago. Sheriff Lens found the bill of sale. Furthermore, if Frankfurt was killed when he returned home, how could he have written out the shopping list? He didn't write it before he left or he'd have dropped it at the grocery store in person."

"What's the second possibility?" Mary asked.

"That the killer was waiting outside and Frankfurt let him in when he returned. The dog didn't attack the man because Frankfurt was with him. The trouble is, we have the same problem. When did Rudy write the shopping list?"

"Are you sure it's his handwriting?"

"Yes. Sheriff Lens recognized it and so did Paul, the delivery boy. If we figure the time it took for writing the list, walking it to the gate, and coming back to be killed, that hardly leaves time for the killer to escape before the FBI agents began their surveillance at five o'clock."

"But it could have been done."

"Only if the autopsy shows he died late Wednesday afternoon."

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I stretched my tense muscles. "Dr. Wolfe should have the results by now. I think I'll walk down to see him."

Dr. Wolfe had a mane of white hair and a chip on his shoulder, especially when it came to me. I'd had a run-in with him earlier that summer when the Medical Society had threatened to suspend my license to practice and our relations were still a bit cool. He was on the staff of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital and my office was in one wing, so it was natural that we ran into each other often.

"Well, Dr. Hawthorne—what brings *you* here?" he asked, looking up from his desk.

"I was wondering if you'd completed the Frankfurt autopsy yet," I told him.

"Playing detective again?"

"The dead man was a patient of mine. Naturally I have an interest in his death," I answered stiffly.

He sighed and picked up the paper in front of him. "What do you want to know?"

"Time of death, cause of death."

"Cause of death, repeated blows to the head which caused massive bleeding in the brain. He would have been unconscious at once and dead soon afterward. The time I would place at midnight Wednesday, give or take four hours either way."

"That late? He couldn't have been killed before five o'clock Wednesday afternoon?"

"No, sir. You know the criteria for determining time of death. Food in the stomach, extent of rigor mortis. As I'm sure you learned at medical school, the stiffening of the body after death is determined by several factors, including the temperature of the surroundings. Rigor wears off after a time in the same manner. Frankfurt died somewhere around midnight on Wednesday."

"All right," I said, accepting it.

"By the way, did you or Sheriff Lens turn the body over after it was found?"

"Of course not. The sheriff may have lifted it slightly to see if there was anything under it, but it was returned to its original position. Why do you ask?"

"It's probably nothing," he said dismissively. "You found him on his back, but there's some bruising on the front of his body, as if blood had settled there after death. I thought he might have been turned over."

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"Not that I know of."

"Perhaps the killer returned and did it."

Sure, I thought, he got into that fortress not once but twice.

I went back to my office and phoned Sheriff Lens. After running through the information I'd gotten from the garage repairman and Dr. Wolfe's autopsy, I asked about the postman. "Does he remember picking up a letter from Frankfurt's mailbox?"

"He's pretty sure there was one on Thursday. He remembers feeling something heavy inside and wondering what it was."

"Any chance he used the key himself to enter the grounds and kill Frankfurt?"

The sheriff snorted. "Who, *Purty?* The man's afraid of dogs, Doc. And rightly so, after the number of times he's been bitten. He stays right in his car when delivering the mail, just leaning out to fill the boxes along the road. He'd never have gone in there with that German shepherd! Besides, he don't deliver the mail at midnight."

"No, I suppose not. Thanks, Sheriff."

In the afternoon, I had other things to think about. Bill Crawley and Gretchen arrived around two, both of them somber and self-conscious.

"What do you want to do, the both of you?" I asked them.

"We want to get married," Bill said at once.

"Then do it."

"Our parents—" Gretchen began.

"You've got a little time yet to think about the best way to approach your folks. I'll speak with them if you'd like me to. Or perhaps you'd prefer your minister." We discussed the possibilities for the next half hour, but in those days, in a town like Northmont, they were distinctly limited. Either there was a marriage or Gretchen would go off somewhere to have the baby, giving it up for adoption after that.

Neither of them favored such an alternative. "If I have the baby, I want to keep it," Gretchen said firmly. "The only problem is with Bill. He starts school again next week."

"Boston's not far. I can be home every weekend, and I'll get a job—"

"In the middle of a Depression?" she questioned. "And what about the Olympics?"

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"Berlin means nothing to me. In fact, if all those Germans are like Rudy Frankfurt, I guess I'd rather stay away."

"He was murdered, you know," I told him.

"I heard about it. He made some remark to me at the grocery store one day about Germans being the superior race. I almost slugged him. I would have if he'd been ten years younger."

I rubbed a hand over my tired eyes. "Where were you around midnight on Wednesday, Bill?"

"If it was midnight, I was home in bed."

"Are you still working at Kasper's?"

"I finished up yesterday. I leave for school on Monday."

I got up and walked around the office, peering out at the sky. It was one of those times when I wished I was anywhere but Northmont. "What's your high-jump record now, Bill? I'll bet you can go over seven feet."

"Well, sure—"

"You know, of all the people in this town I'll bet you're the only one who could have murdered Rudy Frankfurt."

Gretchen gasped and Bill was on his feet at once. "What are you saying? I never killed anyone!"

I forced myself to sit down again. "Consider the facts, Bill. Frankfurt lived inside a virtual fortress. There's a seven-foot fence with a live electric wire on top running all around his property. The yard is patrolled by a German shepherd who won't hesitate to attack. And the house beyond that is locked. There was a key to the gate floating around in the mail, but two FBI agents took turns watching that gate during the entire period. No one entered. Somehow the killer had to come over that fence and get by the dog.

"*You* could have done it, Bill. You could high-jump a seven-foot fence without touching that electric wire. And you could get by the dog because he knew you. Frankfurt purchased him from Kasper's Kennel just two months ago when you were working there."

Bill turned to Gretchen. "Do you believe I killed Frankfurt?"

"Of course not! You wouldn't hurt a fly! Dr. Sam, he doesn't even go hunting!"

"But you just admitted you wanted to punch him, Bill. You could have gone over the fence and passed the dog with a friendly pat on the head. Once you were at the door, Frankfurt would have recognized you and opened it, if only to see what you were doing there. The door would have locked automatically as you left, and you could

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have made your escape the same way, past the dog and over the fence."

"He didn't do it," Gretchen said firmly.

"Unless you're ready to believe in the impossible, there's no other explanation," I told her.

"Are you going to tell this to Sheriff Lens?" Bill asked, looking frightened for the first time.

"I *have* to tell him, if I'm convinced that's what happened," I told him.

I sat alone in my office after I'd sent them off to let me think, but before long Mary confronted me. "Don't those kids have enough trouble without your theories?" she said.

"It's more than a theory," I insisted.

"Oh, yes?" she challenged. "I can think of another one right off the top of my head. Frankfurt got hit by a car while he was walking home. The driver didn't stop and Frankfurt managed to stagger into his house before he died, living long enough to write his shopping list."

"Come on, Mary—he was killed with an axe handle. He wasn't killed by a car." But I was remembering Dr. Wolfe's mention of the blood going to the body's lowest points after death. There was something I wasn't seeing, something that should have been obvious.

"You can't pin half your proof on that dog," Mary said. "Would he even remember Bill Crawley after two months?"

"Dogs often remember—" I began, and then stopped. "The dog! I never thought of the dog!"

"What about him, Sam? You said he was mean-looking."

"Not that dog, Mary—the other dog!"

I slipped into the passenger seat of Paul Nolan's delivery truck just as he was starting out on his last Saturday run.

"Want me to drop you off somewhere, Dr. Sam?" he asked, surprised.

"I just want to ride for a bit, Paul."

He shifted gears and pulled out of Spiggins' parking lot, heading along Main Street toward the town square. "Got any theories about the Frankfurt killing yet?" he asked. "That's your sort of impossible crime, isn't it?"

"I've helped Sheriff Lens with a few of them," I answered, "but

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sometimes with a crime like this there's one angle you just can't figure out, no matter how hard you try."

"You mean the way he got into that farmhouse?"

"I know how he got in, Paul. What I want to know is why. Why did you kill Rudy Frankfurt?"

The steering wheel jerked in his hands and we almost went up on the sidewalk. He twisted it back in time and tightened his grip on it. "What are you talkin' about, Doc?"

"You killed Rudy with that axe handle, Paul. I know all the details about how you did it."

"That's crazy."

"Let me tell you about it, then. Around four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, Rudy Frankfurt brought his car into the garage to have the gear shift adjusted. He was walking home from there—about a half hour walk—when you happened along in your truck and offered him a ride. He accepted, and somewhere along the way you stopped the truck, got him to step out, and beat him unconscious with that axe handle. You thought he was dead then, though he didn't actually die for several hours. You wrapped him in a canvas cover you kept in the back of the truck, then planned to bring the body back to his farmhouse, unlock the gate with his keys, and probably leave the body there if you couldn't get past the dog."

"You and me—we found the body in the house!" he reminded me.

"That was because you returned to find someone parked in the bushes watching the gate. Perhaps you returned several times during the night in hopes of getting in. When it became clear the watchers, whoever they were, didn't intend to leave right away, you devised a scheme to get in there. You found one of Frankfurt's old shopping lists at the grocery and typed those instructions on the bottom. Then you removed the gate key from the ring in the dead man's pocket and enclosed it in an envelope with the grocery list. In the darkness, you could reach the mailbox without being seen by the man in the car because it was partly hidden from his view."

"How would I know which was his gate key?"

"It didn't really matter. You knew you'd be delivering the groceries, and if you'd guessed wrong you'd try the other keys from his pocket. As it turned out, I decided to come with you. This was both an advantage and a disadvantage. I could testify to your innocence, but I might also see something you didn't want me to see. Luckily for you, I was questioning the man watching the house when you struggled with the gate keys and I was busy with the dog when you

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pulled out of sight for a minute or two—long enough to unlock the door with Frankfurt's key, carry him inside, and close the door so that it locked itself. You didn't have time to return the keys, but that didn't matter. The man was in his own house and needn't have had the keys in his pocket."

"Where did I have the body all this time?"

"Hidden somewhere from Wednesday until you returned it to your truck on Friday afternoon, wrapped in that canvas. I finally remembered that other dog sniffing around the back of your truck before you loaded the groceries in. He could smell it, couldn't he?"

Paul pulled over to the side of the road and for just a minute I wondered if he would attack me. "You're basing all this on a dog, Doc?"

"Two dogs, really. When Frankfurt's dog attacked me, you came running out with dogfood. You said he was hungry, and you were right. How'd you know that? How'd you know Frankfurt hadn't been there to feed him? And why did Frankfurt order more dogfood when there was plenty in the garage? When we check, we'll probably find he didn't need most of the things on that old shopping list. And I think we'll also find that the words on the bottom of the shopping list were typed by a machine at the grocery store. There was a lot of dogfood at Frankfurt's place, but there sure wasn't a typewriter."

"Why would I kill him?"

"That's what you're going to tell me. It wasn't just the act of killing him. You went to considerable risk so he'd be found inside his fenced-in farm. You could have just buried the body in the woods. It was almost as if—"

And then I saw it all too clearly. "You graduated from high school with Bill Crawley and Gretchen Pratt, didn't you? This whole thing was planned for one reason—to frame Bill for a murder he didn't commit. You heard him arguing with Frankfurt in the grocery, and you knew Bill was the only person in town who could leap a seven-foot fence. The dog coming from Kasper's Kennel was a bonus that fit right into your scheme."

He was close to the breaking point, close to tears. "I'll say he did it!" he shouted. "I'll still say he did it, no matter what you say!"

He'd wanted me to find the evidence pointed to Bill Crawley, just as I *had* done. He wanted to frame Bill for the killing. "You wanted Gretchen," I said softly.

"God, I've always wanted her, ever since grammar school. First I was going to kill *him*, but I knew she'd suspect me. I decided nobody

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would care about that old German. Even if Bill wasn't convicted, there would always be the suspicion he did it. It would ruin his Olympics chances."

"You're too late, Paul. They'll be married within the month."

He shouted something, and started beating me with his fists. I leaped from the truck, fearing for my life. But he didn't come after me. Instead, he drove away alone, speeding down the country road toward some dark destiny only he could see.

"The police in the next state picked up Paul the following day," Dr. Sam concluded. "He was allowed to plead guilty to a manslaughter charge because of his age and he received a twenty-year sentence." The FBI agents returned to Washington and Bill Crawley returned to college. He and Gretchen were married in October. By the time he went to the Olympics in Berlin the following summer, he was a proud father. He didn't win a medal, but he finished fourth in one event, and that was good enough for him.

"Next time I'll have a more peaceful story for you, about a puzzle that didn't seem to involve a crime at all."

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a NEW short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Jessica sometimes wondered how it came about that she slipped so entirely through what the newspapers call "the welfare net." And it wasn't simply the social workers who were unaware of her existence: school inspectors, the local government bureaucracy, all—it emerged later—were quite unaware that at number forty-one Wilton Grange Avenue there was living not only a Mr. and Mrs. William Derbyshire, but also a daughter, Jessica.

A new story from Robert Barnard so different from his last in EQMM ("An Exceptional Night," in the March issue) we wonder once again at his ability to make us laugh wildly at the characters in his no-holds-barred satire and then to make us feel profoundly for the characters in his straight fiction. Either way, he is a master observer of the human condition . . .

CUPID'S DART

by ROBERT BARNARD

I smile sometimes when I read articles in the newspapers about arranged marriage in the Asian community. I read a lot now—well, I suppose I always did, but I read different things now: newspapers, magazines, things that tell me what life is like, how the world goes. So when I read about arranged marriages, I smile, because the writers always seem so complacent. This is a strange, foreign custom, they seem to be saying, which is quite alien to our native, white tradition. Yet my marriage was arranged as surely as any Moslem girl's, and I went into it with as little knowledge of my husband-to-be.

Oh, I had seen him before. I gather that in some extreme cases,

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the first a Moslem bride sees of the man is at the ceremony. In my case, Mr. Hatfield had been to tea. I remember my mother telling me of this in advance: "We've invited Mr. Hatfield, from church, to come to tea." I remember feeling vaguely bewildered as to what inviting someone to tea entailed. Was it a verb or a noun, how was it spelt? I was eighteen at the time.

I sometimes wonder how it came about that I slipped so entirely through what the newspapers call "the welfare net." And it wasn't simply the social workers who were unaware of my existence: school inspectors, the local government bureaucracy, the national bureaucracy, all—it emerged later—were quite unaware that at number forty-one Wilton Grange Avenue there was living not only Mr. and Mrs. William Derbyshire, but also a daughter, Jessica. Certainly no neighbor ever felt worried enough about me to contact the authorities—but then, this was London, where neighbors keep themselves to themselves. And what was there to be worried about?

I think the reason for my nonappearance on registers and lists, voting rolls, and official records was partly my parents' reluctance that I should, partly the circumstances of my birth. I was born on the island of Madagascar, where my father (who was over forty at the time of my birth, as was my mother) held some sort of official diplomatic post—I think he was British Vice-Consul or something of the kind. He was not an effectual man, not one likely to be a success in any job requiring decision-making or organizational skills. I think he disliked the place, and that the sun got to him. ("Sit in the *shade*, dear, it's much safer," my mother always used to say to me on summer days.) Anyway, it seems he became slightly odd, and was retired with a pension in 1969, when I was eighteen months old. So they returned home by cargo ship and bought the house in Wilton Grange Avenue, and if they never consciously decided to keep my existence a secret, and I really don't think they did, then they certainly never advertised it to officialdom, either.

I think coming home to Britain at the height of the permissive revolution (something I knew nothing about at the time, of course, though I've read a great deal about it recently) strengthened the feelings they already had about the world. Here was a strange land of miniskirts and pot, of flagrantly explicit pop lyrics and men saying any word they wanted on television. I think they saw it from the start as a place of corruption.

This went hand in hand with various other oddities, or what seemed like oddities at the time: a drab, evangelical religion, a

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preference for homeopathic medicine (I was on no doctor's register throughout my childhood), a refusal to own a television or take a newspaper. Not criminal, any of these things, or even outrageously odd—but they added up to a rejection of the world around them. So did their failure to send me to any kind of school, or to procure me any sort of companionship of children my own age. There was them and me in the house alone.

I was, as they used to say about genteel girls long ago, "educated privately at home." They must have taught me to read, and to add up and subtract. Then they just let me loose on the faded, musty collection of books dotted around the house: *Peter Pan, The Wind in the Willows, Five Go Adventuring Again.* There were elementary books about flowers and plants, religious books with pictures of a brown-bearded Christ. There was a globe, and a wall poster of the monarchs of England from 1066 to George V (it had been printed, of course, in their childhood). If I showed any curiosity about anything, they answered my questions. If the question was historical, their answers would have the flavor of a late-Victorian history book: Queen Elizabeth rallying the troops at Tilbury, the Battle of Waterloo being won on the playing-fields of Eton—that kind of thing. If my questions were geographical, their answers would be flavored by a sort of controlled distaste for foreign countries that could not really be called chauvinism since they exhibited the same sort of controlled distaste for Britain and the British.

So that was my childhood. We had a wireless, and sometimes we listened to it—the midmorning story, or *Your Hundred Best Tunes.* At moments of national crisis (elections, the Falklands war), we listened to the news, though I never remember my parents commenting on it afterwards. In the evenings we sometimes played draughts or did an old jigsaw puzzle. In the garden, if it was fine, I might do some weeding or planting—or make friends with the neighbor's cat if I was shielded by a bush. We had no animal, because my father thought them inherently filthy and a source of disease: he got angry when a dog peed against our front gatepost, and the other thing he referred to as "feces" with an expression of distaste so strong as to be obsessional.

It was, I recognize now, an extremely boring childhood. I didn't see it like that at the time, because I'd been conditioned to boredom from my earliest years. If I read in an Enid Blyton story about children who got together and had fun and adventures, I knew that

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this wouldn't happen to me and accepted the fact. I was different, and I had Mummy and Daddy who protected me from harm and kissed me on my birthday.

When I left the house it was to go to church. Quite early in my childhood, my parents began to go to the Congregation of the Divine Elect. This was a tiny group, meeting in what was not much more than a stone-dashed hut, which followed its own doctrines and made its own disciplines. It was nearly two miles away and, as we had no car and my parents disliked using public transport, we walked there on Sunday mornings, me in one of my much-washed print dresses, and when it was over we walked back again, through the streets of South London.

I don't remember ever being told to keep my eyes on the pavement as I walked, but my parents did and so I did. But I did see out of the corners of my eyes hints of the world: dirty children playing and laughing, newspaper headings shrieking sensational stories I could barely understand, black people, people who took off their clothes in the summer sun, young people holding hands. They remained hints only, for on the whole I refrained from asking questions. I wasn't an incurious child, but I had learned that my curiosity was never really satisfied by my parents.

I cannot say what the Congregation of the Divine Elect believed in. To their credit, they didn't believe that they *were* the divine elect merely by the fact of their making their way to that ugly little box in the sidestreet in Croydon. Nevertheless, they were extremely interested in probing who *were* the elect—for, like most nonconformist sects, they did not regard it as presumptuous to scan the ways of God, and many of them over the years convinced themselves that they had got to know His likes and dislikes quite well. There was no regular minister, and a different member of the congregation led the meeting (they preferred not to call it a "service") each week, interrupted by anyone who felt called upon to bear witness or testify—usually to some example of God's goodness to him, or punishment of him, or some revelation personally vouchsafed during the past week. We had just one hymn, from a meager, roneoed collection, and we went our ways soberly at the end. I can't say it meant much to me, but it made a change.

And so the years passed. I began reading different books —*Kidnapped, Berry and Co., Oliver Twist.* And as well as reading, I began to like music. I was allowed to listen to concerts on the wireless,

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though I think my parents got little pleasure from them themselves, and it was never suggested that I might learn an instrument. My body grew and there were strange changes in it which frightened me at first. But my mother merely said, shortly and drily, "It's natural. It always happens." So I suppose I stopped being afraid.

I reached eighteen without being aware that there was anything special about being eighteen. If any coming of age was celebrated in any of the books in the house, it would have been a twenty-first. So I became legally adult and eligible to vote (except that I was on no electoral rolls) without anything being said about it. But my parents—who were now old, even I could see that—registered that time was passing.

It was about three weeks after my birthday that my mother said, apparently casually, "We've invited Mr. Hatfield, from church, to come to tea on Friday."

At the time I merely nodded, being uncertain, as I said, of what coming to tea implied, and not being sure either which of the Congregation's members Mr. Hatfield was.

In the course of Friday, I discovered what having someone to tea implied, for my mother's preparations, though modest, were undoubtedly special. She bought a small brown and a small white loaf, cut them more thinly than usual, and spread some with something called Sandwich Spread, some with salmon and shrimp paste, and some with an egg mayonnaise she had concocted herself. She also brought out a jam sponge which had been bought at the local supermarket. (I had never been myself to a supermarket, but my mother or my father always did the weekly shop there, I think because they liked the anonymity.) This sponge she cut up early on, so that the edges of the slice I had at tea were already slightly crisp. All these preparations were done rather clumsily, as befitted a ceremonial meal that was thirty or forty years out of date. Everything was already set out, waiting only a fresh brew of tea, when Mr. Hatfield arrived.

He was a man in his fifties whom I had seen my parents exchanging the occasional word with after the Sunday meeting. He was stout, decidedly so, but he seemed well meaning, and had a little goatee beard. The Congregation disapproved of display in dress (it was easier to say what the Congregation disapproved of than to say what they believed in), but for this tea Mr. Hatfield was besuited, undoubtedly tidy and spruce, and even sported a white carnation in his buttonhole.

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Oddly enough, what I remember about the occasion was our tea service, which I sat looking at much of the time. I compared this tea with great social occasions in books, and I saw that our tea service wasn't up to par. Each cup and saucer suffered from small chips or cracks and the colored pattern was dingy. Only the slops basin, hardly ever used, had any freshness.

Mr. Hatfield talked mostly to my parents, and even with them things were not easy. My mother and father had few topics of conversation because they had few interests. Eventually, when they got on to homeopathy, things went more easily, my father having some expertise in that field.

Occasionally Mr. Hatfield would address a remark to me.

"I hear you're fond of music."

"Yes, I am."

"I have a very old record player, but I've not acquired a great record collection, I'm afraid."

I nodded, not seeing the relevance of this. I wondered what time a coming to tea ended, because there was something I wanted to hear on the wireless that evening.

In another interval in the conversation, he said:

"Do you enjoy cooking?"

That puzzled me rather. I didn't see how one could enjoy cooking, which in our household meant the provision of meals. However, I said, "Yes, I do quite enjoy cooking," in my clear, old-fashioned way, and that seemed to satisfy him.

He went at six, saying he had to attend a meeting of the Elders of the Congregation. I was pleased, because I wanted to listen to *Lucia di Lammermoor*, relayed from Covent Garden. I now knew what having someone to tea meant, and I put Mr. Hatfield from my mind.

Until, that is, five or six days later, when my mother came into the sitting room, where I was reading in the light of a rather dismal day.

"Jessica, your father and I have been giving a lot of thought to what is to happen to you after we are gone."

I knew that "gone" meant "dead" in my mother's language, and she rather frightened me.

"Can't I go on living here?"

"We don't see how. Your father's pension dies with us. You see,

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we have—we have had an offer of marriage for you. From Mr. Hatfield, at church."

I knew then and there that this was something that they had arranged themselves. I also knew that, in their way, their motives were well meaning. I sat quietly for some moments, grateful for my book to look at.

"Marriage?" I said at last. "I don't really understand what that means."

"It means you would live with him as man and wife. Like Daddy and me." She added rather awkwardly: "Mr. Hatfield will show you what it means."

"I see," I said.

"Your father and I think you should accept. For your future."

I thought for a few moments more. Mr. Hatfield had seemed a fairly amiable man. Perhaps if I had been more used to choice I would have been better equipped to say no, but my life had had few alternatives, and fewer where I had been the one who decided.

"All right," I said.

Oddly enough, I didn't see Mr. Hatfield again in the days before the wedding. Presumably, he didn't think it worthwhile to get to know me better. I suspect he was spring-cleaning his house, which had doubtless been neglected in the years since his first wife died. The wedding was set for a fortnight after my mother's announcement to me (that was what I felt it amounted to). Toward the end of that time, they packed my clothes and a few other personal things into two very old suitcases. These my father took round to Mr. Hatfield's house on the day before the wedding. I wondered how I would do without the books.

I married Mr. Hatfield, in fact, twice. The Congregation was not legally entitled to perform the sacrament of marriage, so we had to go through a Registry Office ceremony first. It was not much of a ceremony (but then neither was the Congregation's), but I did learn for the first time that my husband's Christian name was Felix. The Registry Office, a little off our route, was still only five minutes from the Congregation, and we walked on there—Mr. Hatfield, my parents, and me, me in one of the two or three faded print dresses I wore regularly to church. Mr. Hatfield wore the suit he had worn to tea with us, now with a brilliant red carnation in his buttonhole.

The Congregation had had a bit of trouble over their marriage service, or meeting as they called it, the last one having been over

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twelve years previously, and what they came up with didn't have a great deal of shape to it. First there was a hymn—"For All the Saints." The Congregation sang remarkably badly for nonconformists. Then Mr. Potts was moved to share with us a feeling which he suggested was divinely inspired and which had come to him in the course of the week: this, I gathered, was that our union would be long, happy, and fruitful. Then the leader for that week led us in a rather bare version of the marriage service, in which I promised to love and honor Mr. Hatfield, and he promised to do the same by me.

Then, thankfully, it was all over. There was tea afterward (there was a gas-ring at the back of the church) and someone had brought along a supermarket cake. Everyone quietly wished us well. I don't remember any of them showing signs of embarrassment.

Quite soon we went home—only of course it was a new "home." My parents walked with us for five minutes, but then we all stopped and it was indicated that Mr. Hatfield and I would now turn off. Both my parents kissed me, increasing my sense of this as a special day, and my mother told me to be a good girl. Then Mr. Hatfield and I continued on our way in the bustle of early evening, through strange streets that were yet very much like the streets I already knew.

Mr. Hatfield made sober conversation. I already had a slight sense that there was a difference between the public Mr. Hatfield and the private one. He said it had been a very moving service, that Mr. Potts had spoken most impressively, that the good wishes of the Congregation had been most gratifying. I said yes to all these propositions. Quite soon we arrived at 10 Mafeking Terrace—Mr. Hatfield's home.

You will perhaps not realize how strange it felt, going into this house. You see, I had never in my memory been in anyone's home other than my own. It was, as I said, spotlessly clean, but the furniture was old and very shabby. Mr. Hatfield, I learned later, was a commercial traveler, and not well off. I saw my cases in the hall, and when we went through into the dining room I saw the table laid for two.

"Just a modest meal," said Mr. Hatfield, "something I can heat up in the oven." He smiled with a hint of roguishness. "An intimate meal for two."

He went over to a wooden box in the corner and pressed a button. In a moment, astonishingly, a talking face appeared on a screen.

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This must be television, which I had heard about but never seen. I stood there in the middle of the room, looking, entranced.

"Just hear the news headlines."

I didn't register what they were talking about, only that here was a handsome man and a pretty woman telling us things. After a minute or two, Mr. Hatfield went to turn it off, but he saw me still transfixed by the pictures and took himself off to the kitchen.

As I watched, things gradually began to make some sense. There were politicians talking about poverty and homelessness, there was a war somewhere abroad, there was a football team playing another football team, there was the Queen (I recognized her) opening a bridge somewhere. All in enchanting pictures. It was as good as a book.

When it was over, Mr. Hatfield turned it off. It became a box again. He said, "Perhaps you'd help me serve up dinner."

I went with him into the kitchen, which like the rest of the house was clean but shabby. The dinner certainly didn't need much serving up. It was in the oven in two silver dishes, each one holding the whole meal: roast beef, roast potatoes, carrots, and peas, all in a rich brown gravy. I know because I read the cardboard container it had come in. I thought it was wonderful. We transferred it onto our plates and got knives and forks from a drawer.

"Soon you can cook me really nice meals," said Mr. Hatfield, smiling encouragingly. I didn't see any point at all in all the preparation that cookery usually involved when you could get lovely meals like this. But I nodded. I nodded a lot that day.

While we ate, Mr. Hatfield made little dribbles of good-humored conversation, with sometimes the odd roguish joke which I did not then understand. But I think he saw my eyes straying sideways to the television box in the corner. I was wondering whether it was quiet because there was nothing on it, or because he had switched it off. He saw my fascination (I realize now he was a kindly man), and when we had eaten a sponge pudding with syrup over it, also from a cardboard container I had seen in the kitchen, he switched it on again.

This time it was even more wonderful. It was what I now know was a "soap"—people in a street, quarreling, laughing, drinking, kissing. It was like suddenly seeing the world. I sat on the sofa, and when he had washed up the plates Mr. Hatfield sat beside me. He put his arm around my shoulders, and when the people on the box kissed he bent over and kissed me on the cheek—not on the lips as

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they did, because I didn't turn my face away from the screen. After the people in the street, there were American policemen, and then people playing some sort of game. It was wonderful, enthralling.

"I don't think your parents would approve," said Mr. Hatfield.

I didn't know whether or not they would approve, but I did know they wouldn't themselves have watched.

At half past nine, Mr. Hatfield pressed the switch again.

"Time for beddy-byes," he said, with a funny wry smile and a spark in his eyes. I nodded. I went to bed around that time as a rule, and I presumed the television people must close down then.

I saw in the hall that the small suitcase with my night things in and a change of clothes had gone. As we went up the stairs, Mr. Hatfield put his arm around my waist, which I did not like, but did not know how to stop. In the bedroom, the light was already on, and I saw that my nightdress had been laid out on an enormous bed. I waited for Mr. Hatfield to go, but he didn't. He shut the door, and then came over and began fumbling with the buttons at the back of my dress.

"Don't," I said.

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't tell him to go away in his own house. I took my nightdress and went over to a dark corner, where I removed my dress and petticoat as modestly as I could, then put my nightdress on and removed my outer clothes. I knew that Mr. Hatfield hadn't gone away and I didn't want to turn around, but in the end I didn't know what else to do.

It was horrible. He had taken all his clothes off, and I saw that he wasn't made like me. As I watched, my heart beating fiercely, the thing beneath his fat belly began rising and growing big.

"Look! Cupid's dart!" he said, with a dreadful jollity. "I'm going to teach you all about it!"

I don't know how I managed to endure it. Somehow I seemed to detach my mind so that I could relax. I must have seemed quite limp—dead—as he led me to the bed, pulled up my nightdress, and began doing what he wanted to do to me. But if my mind was in another place, it was also, or part of it, screaming with nausea and humiliation. He switched out the light from beside the bed, and I felt him on top of me, and part of me was howling with terror and pain, part of me wanting to vomit. But I just lay there, even when, not long afterward, he came at me again. He had been long without

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a wife, I now understand. Eventually he did it again—we had not exchanged a word in the meanwhile—and soon he lay over on his back and went into a sound, noisy sleep.

I lay there, crying a little, but totally passive. But the part of my mind that had screamed with nausea knew that something had to be done. Something had to be done so that this would never happen to me again. I lay there thinking, wondering. Then I got up very quietly and somehow found my way to the door. Once outside, I closed it, and fumbled round on the wall until I found the landing light. Then I went down to the kitchen. In the drawer that Mr. Hatfield had taken our cutlery from, I looked at and felt two or three long knives. They were old but kept sharp. I remember feeling a terrible calm.

I took one of them, switched off the kitchen light, and then slowly made my way upstairs. I could hear the snores of satisfied sleep, louder and louder. I opened the bedroom door, and left it open so that the dim light from the landing would assist my aim. I gently pulled back the blanket and sheet that he had over him, surveyed the plump body, then raised the knife and plunged it into his stomach, into his Cupid's dart, once, twice, again and again, pushing him back when he tried to raise himself, screaming with agony (screaming as I had wanted to scream) until finally I plunged it into his heart.

I didn't look at him again. When he was quite still, I took the little suitcase he had brought up, and the clothes I had taken off before the terrible experience. I went down to the kitchen, took off my nightdress, which was hideous and sticky with our bloods, and bundled it under the sink. Then, in the dim light from the landing (I wanted no light now), I found my toilet bag, took out a flannel, and washed myself at the sink.

Then I put on my clothes again. I was quite calm still, but I knew I had done something unusual and I knew I couldn't go back to my parents' home again. I remember wondering where poor mad Lucia had stabbed her husband.

I repacked my suitcase. The handle was sticky, so I washed it clean. In the hall, it was lighter. On an impulse, I went into the dining room and pressed the button on the television. The picture was of naked bodies, writhing together, so I switched it off. I found my coat in the little cupboard and put it on. The jacket of Mr. Hatfield's suit was in there, too, and I felt inside it and found a wallet. There was fifty pounds in it, so I took that. I knew I would

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need money, though I knew what nothing cost. Then I took up my little suitcase, opened the front door, and went out into the street.

It was more than three weeks before they found me. The first Sunday when we were not at church, my parents wondered a little but did nothing. The second Sunday, they went round to the house but found it dark and locked. On the Monday, my father walked to the paint firm for which Mr. Hatfield worked. He found that Mr. Hatfield had intended to take ten days off after the wedding, but that he had been expected back that day. The people there found my father very odd. They knew Mr. Hatfield had been about to marry a young lady he hardly knew, but he had always been a meticulous man where work was concerned. By the end of the day they called the police.

The police were hampered by the fact that my parents had no photograph of me. No visual record of my existence. They talked to them, talked to neighbors who had seen me in the garden, talked to members of the Congregation. I think they quite soon understood the situation. They realized I had nobody to go to, no place I knew where I could find refuge. They knew I would have to be sleeping rough.

I greatly enjoyed those weeks, most of the time. When I left the house in Mafeking Terrace, I walked through the night, following signs toward the center. I had read *Oliver Twist* and I knew that London—real London, not suburbia—was the place to lose yourself in.

As light came up, I often stopped to look in shop windows, noticing prices. Later I would linger by shops with televisions on in the window, seeing the shadows of the world on the dancing screens. But now I, too, was in the world. Sometimes, where there were seats, I rested, watching the world go by.

How I gravitated to a place where there were others like me, people with no homes and no futures, I don't remember. But I recall a man sitting with me on a bench somewhere, very shabby and kind, and telling me that under the bridges near the Festival Hall there was good sleeping to be found. I had heard concerts from the Festival Hall and I suppose the name lingered in my mind. Somehow, days later, I found my way there.

I had already learned more than I had in a lifetime before. I knew about drugs. I knew about people who used to be in mental hospitals

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but were now on the streets. I understood what prostitution was. I had never realized before that there were child beggars today—I had thought that was Dickens' London, long past. Now I met them, talked to them.

Around Waterloo Bridge, people were very kind to me. "You're the sort of kid who doesn't know she's born," one of them said to me. He lent me two cardboard boxes, for the nights. He taught me to take good care of my money. I met people, talked to people. Many of them had come from homes much worse than mine. Once I met an Asian girl who had been forced into an arranged marriage and had run away from it. I didn't exchange stories with her, though. She was very disturbed—she frightened me.

Soon I was known. People called me "Jess" and smiled at me. I was with them and of them, and even ate like them—delicious slices of pizza, things called kebabs, curries from cardboard boxes, anything we could retrieve from the rubbish.

I think it was my little suitcase that marked me out for the police. Most of us had plastic carrier bags. I still had five pounds left of the fifty when a policeman came up to me in one of the windy walkways around the National Theatre and said: "What's your name?"

"Jessica Derbyshire," I said without thinking. But I believe that even if I had thought I would have said the same. I knew a life as good as that couldn't last.

He was very kind—all of them were. I think enough was known about me for them to understand how it happened. He didn't summon help, or handcuff me, but walked with me to the nearest police station, talking and asking me questions. Then it all began—interviews, medical examinations, psychiatric examinations. I was in jail on remand for a while, but it wasn't really unpleasant. I learned a lot there.

My father came to visit me. He said: "It was difficult to know what to do for the best," and "This is killing your mother." It looked as if it were killing him, too, so the next day I wrote him a note saying I would understand if he didn't come again. It was odd how easily I could do without the only people I had ever really known.

The trial was funny. It was very short because, as people kept saying, the facts were not in dispute. Everyone seemed to go out of their way to say nice things, or pitying things, about me. One of the policemen described me as very gentle. At the end of it, I was sent here.

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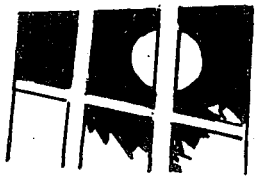
I like it here. I've learned a lot, as I did in prison. I don't mean school things, though I do have a teacher who comes in to teach me the usual things that most children learn in schools. She is alternately surprised at the things I don't know and the things I do. No, I meant I'd learned a lot from the people, the inmates and the staff. I count almost all of them as my friends, so the words "criminally insane" can't in fact be as nasty as they sound. Some of them are so disturbed that communication with them is difficult. Most of us, though, can talk about ourselves and what we have done, and help each other.

My teacher has tried to tell me about "the facts of life," but I always stop her. Those things are going to have no place in my life. I have a special friend here, a young schizophrenic, and in his good times we talk a lot, and we sit and hold hands. Nothing more, of course. The facts of life that I'm interested in I started to learn when I shut the front door of the house in Mafeking Terrace, and I've gone on learning under Waterloo Bridge, in prison, and here. I know whatever happens, I will never stop learning.

My psychiatrist says I may soon be ready to go out into the community again. He says it was not the intention of the court to shut me away for the rest of my life. He says it would be unwise for me to return to live at home, and I agree with him. He thinks I may be able to qualify for university, or for special training of some kind. We talk a lot about this, and I can see lots of possibilities—in fact, one delightful possibility after another. It is very difficult to make choices with the little knowledge of the world that I have. But it's good to have someone who has confidence in me. He says things like, "You've got real talent" and "Anyone can see that you're not a threat to the community."

I hope and pray he's right. God grant he's right.



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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

Max Umbershray's mind was made up. These four would positively perish at his hands. Others he might improvise.

He set the wheels in motion immediately after breakfast, arranging the transfer of a large sum to a bank in Switzerland. Then, slowly, week by week, he began liquidating his assets. He sold his books, his paintings, his collection of Batman comics, his jewelry. He decided to kill all his victims by poisoning them. This turned out to be easier than you might think . . .

GUESS WHO

by GEORGE BAXT

I can still remember that morning, a little over three years ago, when I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, and then came to the decision that would alter my life completely. It was a daring decision, a brave one, a dangerous one. It wasn't decided at the spur of the moment. It was something I had been thinking about for months, but now that I had inherited a tidy sum from my nasty Aunt Myrtle—my late father's oldest sister, who was a genius at poison-pen letters and obscene phone calls—I was in a financially viable position to make this decision effective.

First I was determined to settle old scores. I remember as I brushed my teeth that morning, I decided my first victim would be Elsie Lee Mackintosh. Our friendship, a tenuous one at best, had terminated almost twenty years ago. I was living in London at the time and she came for a visit with some obnoxious woman named Selina Fongula. *Nothing* about London pleased them. They disliked the food, their hotel, the people, my friends—and before their stay was over, they loathed me.

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I remember my exasperation at the way they dressed. "You can't walk through London wearing cowboy suits and ten-gallon hats!" I told them.

"They're only eight-gallon," countered Elsie Lee in a voice that made the late Wallace Beery sound like a soprano.

Then Selina chipped in her two cents' worth. "Ever since you've lived in London you've behaved like you're better than everybody else."

"I behaved that way before I came to London," I reminded her.

Anyway, when they returned to New York, they badmouthed me all over the place. I later learned they'd lost me some script assignments. That had been almost two decades earlier but the ashes of hatred still smoldered. (I've been reading Danielle Steele.)

While shaving that same morning, I settled on my second victim: Daniel Wayne. This monster I first knew when he was an actor and I was scraping a kind of living as an actors' agent. (Actors' agent, press agent, scriptwriter, blackmailer, you name it, I've been there. I'm a Gemini—that should explain it.) Because he was never too particular about how he curried favor, Wayne became a powerful film producer. I knew Wayne was aware of a crack I made about his curry when he had me to his office to discuss a possible script assignment. I was surprised until I saw the look on his face when I entered the office—it was best described as a kindly sneer. A golf cart would have come in handy to give me a lift from the doorway to the chair opposite his desk. The walk was long and tiresome and I was happy to sit down.

"So you'd like to write a script for me," he began.

That wasn't the case at all and he knew it. It was all my agent Rose Tubman's doing, my being there in the spider's office. "Rose asked me to take this meeting," I told him. "That's all I know. And if you have no intention of discussing the assignment, why am I here?"

I shouldn't have asked. The torrent of vituperation that inundated me was horrendous. I can still remember the hideous words he hurled at me as I fled the office. "I'm going to see that you never work in this business again!"

He succeeded. That's why I became a novelist.

Under a near-scalding shower, I determined my third victim. Patrick Cantor. Never heard of him? Of course not. He's a soap-opera director. This gargoyle I met in London. He was having a rough time of it there due to his lack of talent and, feeling sorry for him

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and being very successful as a film writer, I loaned him several thousand dollars. A few years later, when Daniel Wayne's threat became an actuality, I asked Patrick, who was now coining a small fortune in daytime television, to repay the debt. He never returned my calls. My letters went unanswered. I later heard he owed thousands to thousands. When the wife of a British director died of cancer several years ago, I learned that Patrick had said, "Oh, thank God—that's *one* who won't be dunning me for what I owe her." Charming.

My fourth victim occurred to me while I was toweling myself: garbage-mouth slanderer, Drew Samarkand, the publisher—the one who publishes the works of obscure writers who, thanks to his efforts on their behalf, continue to remain obscure. He published a few of my early works before I wised up to his creative bookkeeping. When I went to a bigger and much better publisher, he threatened me with breach of contract. He also spread nasty gossip about myself and a good friend (male, very male) because we took some trips together, but my lawyer in a rare display of common sense convinced me not to take him to court.

"The case could turn nasty, especially with someone as vicious as Samarkand."

"But his stories are scurrilous!"

"What?" He was a good lawyer, but his vocabulary was limited.

"Nasty. Rotten."

"Don't sue."

"He owes me money!"

"That's something else. That we collect, or we ruin him in the publishing business."

So my mind was made up. These four would positively perish at my hands. Others I might improvise. I set the wheels in motion immediately after breakfast, arranging the transfer of a large sum to a bank in Switzerland. Then slowly, week by week, I began liquidating my assets. I sold my books, my paintings, my collection of Batman comics, my good pieces of furniture, my jewelry. I decided to kill all my victims by poisoning them. This turned out to be easier than you might think. I knew their favorite restaurants and haunted the restaurants for weeks. I knew on which days they usually lunched and enlisted the help of headwaiters and bartenders, none of whom could resist the greasing of a palm.

Archibald Glomm was a detective I befriended while researching

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one of the few thrillers I attempted to write. He accompanied me on many of these luncheons when he was available. He was with me when I murdered Elsie Lee Mackintosh in Sardi's. It went like this.

The first time I lunched there when she was there, she simply glared at me, ignoring my friendly smile. The second time, I sent a note suggesting we let bygones be bygones. With a theatrical gesture, she tore up the note and let the pieces drift into her unfinished bowl of Manhattan clam chowder. If some busboy in the kitchen polished off the remains of the soup, I'm sure he was unaware he was eating my words. The third time, I went to the bar and asked the bartender to mix her favorite drink, a Brandy Alexander. (Actually, it's an alcoholic milkshake, but Elsie Lee loved that sort of thing.) He mixed my usual Bloody Mary and I took the drinks to her table myself.

"Elsie Lee," I said, "you can either throw this drink in my face or join me in a toast, because I'm leaving this country forever and you'll never see me again. But I'm determined to make amends with you and some others before I go. How about it, sport? It's your favorite. A Brandy Alexander."

Her perpetual sneer was as unbecoming as always. "Good riddance to bad rubbish," she said with an ugly scowl that became her. She took her glass and drank a healthy swig, leaving a creamy trace of moustache on her moustache.

"Goodbye, Elsie Lee," I said with an exaggerated bow and returned to my friend Archibald.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"Oh, it's too involved to go into," I said, picking up the menu. "Do you know what you're having?"

Later that day, while I was putting the finishing touches to a short story I'd written, Archibald phoned me.

"Say, Maxie," he said—I'm Max Umbershray, by the way—"did you know some broad named Elsie Lee Mackintosh?"

"Sure. She was lunching at Sardi's when we were there today."

"Well, guess what?"

"What?"

"She's dead."

"No."

"Yes."

"How?"

"Not sure. They're scheduling an autopsy. But from the look of

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her—texture of the skin, condition of the nails—the doc suspects a strong poison."

"It would *have* to be strong if it *was* poison. She thrived on venom."

"Was she a good friend of yours?"

"Once upon a time, back in the Stone Age."

"Some coincidence us being in the same restaurant she was in, eh?"

"If you say so."

"Listen, Maxie, the next lunch is on me, okay? I mean, I can't go on freeloading all the time."

"No problem, Archie," I reminded him, "thanks to Aunt Myrtle."

Daniel Wayne met his demise at the Four Seasons. The least I could do was poison him in an atmosphere of elegance. He was a tough one, though. He resisted my drinks, my notes, my smiles, my everything, until one day, seated at an adjoining table, I heard him order a very expensive and elegant dessert that called for some Calvados. It was risky, but when the waiter set the tray with the dessert on the serving table, I deftly passed my hand that held the small vial of poison over the dish and prayed the lady dining with him wouldn't ask for a taste. She was a famous movie star and I liked her.

Later that afternoon, Archibald was on the phone. "Who'd you lunch with today?"

I told him an old friend, and that was the truth.

"Was it at the Four Seasons, by any chance?"

"Are you having me tailed for some reason?"

He chuckled. "You know Daniel Wayne, don't you?"

"Know and loathe."

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"He's dead."

This one I let fly. "Wheeeee!"

"Same story as Elsie Lee Mackintosh. The doc suspects strong poison."

"Hey, Arch?"

"What?"

"Is there such a thing as weak poison?"

While all this was going on, I was spreading the word that I was in poor health. Some people sympathized but I noted that most

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seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. I intimated that I was thinking of going abroad soon because of my health. Archibald stayed in frequent touch and I suspected he suspected, but it didn't worry me. I knew I was committing perfect crimes and that my plan to escape justice was detectiveproof. And I was too busy plotting Patrick Cantor's murder.

Wouldn't you know that the cheap boor who owed me and everybody ate lunch every day at McDonald's—the same thing every day, a Big Mac and a diet coke. One day, wearing a disguise, I stood next to him and ordered the very same thing. Then I deftly swept his diet coke off his tray onto the floor. He waited and howled and cursed, of course, and in my best German accent I insisted he accept my diet coke in replacement.

"You didn't happen to lunch at McDonald's on Eighth and Fifty-sixth today, did you?" asked Archie when he phoned me around six.

Since I'd been in disguise, I managed to lie blithely. "Me, in a fast-food emporium?" I said with appropriate disgust. "How can you ask?"

"You knew Patrick Cantor, didn't you?"

"That no-talent soap-opera director? What about him?"

"Dead."

"So there is a God."

"Poisoned, like the rest of them."

I played dumb. "What rest of them?"

"The others who were poisoned. Mackintosh and Wayne."

"Do you think there's some connection?" I asked with awe.

"It's possible."

"Agatha Christie said poison was a woman's method."

"You mean I should *cherchez la femme?*" He pronounced "femme" *femmee*, which didn't surprise me.

"Search me. You're the detective."

Poisoning Drew Samarkand wasn't easy. The big slob usually dined in a Chinese restaurant in his neighborhood. His eating habits were repulsive. Set a heaping plate of food in front of him and, like a vacuum cleaner, he could make short work of the food in under five minutes. It took a lot of heavy thinking before I decided the obvious was the only way to accomplish my mission.

On the fatal day, I sat at the bar with my back to him. When his order was placed in front of him, I hurried to his side and said, "Drew Samarkand, you old crook! Remember me?" And right under his frightened face, as he stared paralyzed at the sight of me, I dumped

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the poison and went sailing out of the restaurant into oblivion. With my four most important scores settled and my Swiss Air ticket in my inside jacket pocket, I had every intention of being on that flight tonight.

A moment after I got to my apartment, the phone rang. I knew it would be Archibald. It was three hours after my encounter with Drew Samarkand and I knew he had to be dead by now. The shock of his encounter with me would never spoil his appetite.

"Maxie?"

"Yeah, Arch. How goes it?"

"Maxie—" his voice sounded strained "—we got us another poison victim."

"No kidding."

"Your old archenemy, Drew Samarkand."

"Hallelujah!"

After a telling pause, he said, "Maxie, I think we ought to have a talk."

"Sure. When?"

"How about an hour from now at your place?"

"It's a mess," I told him. A mess? There wasn't a stick of furniture left. The last pieces had been sold and removed and all that was left in the apartment besides me and the telephone were my overnight bag and the case containing my toilet articles.

"I don't mind," he said.

"If you don't mind, I don't mind," I said breezily. "See you in an hour."

I hated standing him up. Archibald, despite his name, was a really good guy. A really good friend. I hated putting this over on him, but someday when we met again, and I had a feeling we'd meet again, I knew he'd understand.

I thought about this as I drank my vodka martini on the rocks without garbage as we flew over the ocean toward Switzerland. Although I lived in London for a good many years and traveled about a good bit, I had somehow never made it to Switzerland. I was looking forward to this trip—eagerly.

Since most of you read a lot about this in the tabloids, you know I lost myself in Switzerland for well over a year. Doctor Godowski's clinic was celebrated not only for its good works but for its discretion. Being there was safer than an unnumbered bank account. I had all the necessary examinations, all the psychiatric examinations (a re-

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quired part of the regimen), and in between treatments I read in the American newspapers about how Detective Archibald Glomm had secured the cooperation of Interpol in helping to track down the suspected mass poisoner, Maxwell Umbershray. (Mass poisoner? Only four victims?) My remaining publisher, the good one, republished all my titles and I was delighted to see them all become best-sellers.

The treatments were incredibly painful, but it was fascinating watching myself undergo this total physical change even though I knew that once I left the safety and anonymity of the clinic I'd be charting a course into dangerous waters.

While recovering, I studied American law, and if I must say so myself, I was brilliant at it.

Finally the time arrived for me to leave Doctor Godowski. He accepted my hundreds of thousands of dollars with alacrity and a slight choke in his voice. I flew to Paris and bought myself a whole new wardrobe. I booked a flight on the Concorde, but first cabled Archie Glomm a cryptic, unsigned message: SUSPICIOUS CHARACTER RETURNING TO NEW YORK IN DISGUISE. I added, of course, the expected time of arrival.

As I came through Customs, I saw Archie anxiously studying all the passengers. He looked at me twice before he stiffened.

He came rushing toward me, followed by three other detectives, and shouted, "Maxwell Umbershray!"

I stood stock still, one hand provocatively poised on my left hip, the other fingering the expensive strand of pearls I'd picked up at Cartier's that morning. My Yves Saint Laurent dress and furs had set me back an ugly penny.

"Maxwell Umbershray," Archie charged, "I arrest you for—"

"Just one moment, young man," I said sternly in my silky new voice, "my name is *Maxine* Umbershray." I flashed my Swiss passport under his nose. "There *is* no Maxwell Umbershray."

As you know, of course, my case is driving the members of the Supreme Court insane while I do my guest appearances on television and the lecture circuit and consider an offer from George Lucas and Steven Spielberg to do a film on my life—I mean lives.

I never will forget the look on poor Archie's face. The horror, the surprise, the confusion, you name it, it was reflected in his face. "I *am* Maxine Umbershray," I repeated, this time with a Cheshire-cat smile on my face. "Arch, I'm not the man I used to be."

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1989 EQMM READERS AWARD

Your vote is in and the 1989 winner of the EQMM Readers Award is

JAMES POWELL for "A Dirge for Clowntown"

"A Dirge for Clowntown," in the November issue, was James Powell's 67th story to be published in EQMM. His "The Friends of Hector Jouvet" appeared in EQ's Department of First Stories in April 1966. Some information about him from *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers:* Born in Toronto, 12 June 1932. Educated at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, B.A. 1955; University of Paris, 1955–56. Teacher in France; journalist; editor of antiques newspaper, Pennsylvania.

In the same volume, he comments: "I see myself as a writer of humorous fiction who is attracted to the mystery story. I don't find this strange. Both the funny story and the mystery travel down a strongly plotted road, all the while preparing the reader for the punchline, the unexpected ending which he must instantly understand was the only ending there ever could have been.

"Where they fall into groups, my stories are currently of three kinds: those that relate the adventures of Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, an earnest bungler of whom I am unashamedly fond; those fantasies of mystery and detection told in nursery-story or fairy-tale settings; and stories about the Riviera principality of San Sebastiano. Among these can be the found the cases of the Ambrose Ganelons, four generations of detectives with the same name whose activities span 125 years."

Lately James Powell had been adding to his impressive repertoire more non-series stories, stories of a somewhat more poignant—while often still hilarious—nature. "A Dirge for Clowntown" was one of these and your enthusiastic response to it indicates it is a kind of story he would do well to continue writing. Two other non-series stories by him ("Burning Bridges" and "The Greenhouse Dogs") also received votes from readers as their favorite EQMM story of the year, as did two of his series stories—"The Snood of Night" and "The Sting of the Hoop Snake."

On the opposite page are photographs of Mr. Powell and the two runners-up, Doug Allyn (who came in second for "Star Pupil" in the October issue) and Patricia Moyes (for "The Faithful Cat" in the December issue)—as well as synopses of the stories. Congratulations to these faithful star contributors and our fervent thanks to everyone who took the time and care to vote.

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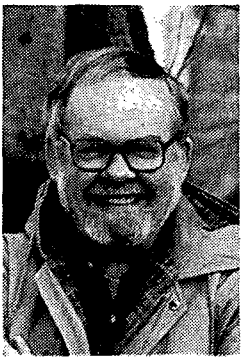

JAMES POWELL

In "A Dirge for Clowntown," Inspector Bozo of the Clowntown homicide squad investigates the murder, in Pagliacci Terrace, of a clown—from a massive dose of strychnine in the custard pie delivered to him on his birthday.

DOUG ALLYN

The motivations of an ideological creative-writing teacher at a prison and the cynical motivations of his most talented convict student create a conflict that affect both men in Doug Allyn's "Star Pupil."

PATRICIA MOYES

A scheming husband meets his match in an unwitting confraternity of cat lovers and his wife's faithful cat in Patricia Moyes' "The Faithful Cat." The story's second appearance in EQMM did not weaken its popularity with readers.

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a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA OWENS

"What did Bobby want?" Del asked finally.

His mother gave him a little smile. "See how we're getting on, I guess," she said. After he didn't say anything back, she looked down and studied the cold ham on her plate. "Well, too, he was telling me about some places that's had things stolen lately—tools, tires, and such. He wanted—you know, he thought your daddy might have heard something about it . . ."

THE KILLING OF BULL KIRKSHAW

by BARBARA OWENS

My daddy used to beat hell out of Mama every Saturday night. Folks came to expect it. I suspect most of the ladies in church every Sunday came to see how bad Loney Kirkshaw looked this time. And they got their money's worth. Mama took religion serious, so there she'd be, singing like an angel in the choir, every scrape and shiner showing.

About the time I was twelve, I figured out why all the men came to church so regular, too. One look at Mama made you want to squeeze her. She was little and soft with curly yellow hair and blue eyes—a pure joy to look at, even mostly beat up like she was.

Mama's given name was Leona, but only one person ever called her that. She was just sweet Loney, and everyone said it was a shame she ever took up with Bull Kirkshaw. Her people was honest, God-fearing farmers and she'd had two years high school. She was fifteen when he laid his eye on her, sixteen when I was born. I didn't know till I was grown that there was almost three of us at the wedding. Four, if you count the shotgun, I guess.

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Nobody in Hickory had any use for Daddy's people. Kirkshaws was shiftless, hard drinkers and fighters. Granddaddy Kirkshaw run a still up in the river bluffs—Daddy used to brag he was weaned on rotgut. They didn't pay much attention to schooling. Daddy just had three years. Mostly he worked when he had to and got drunk regular. The whole county was afraid of him. He was the biggest, meanest, and strongest. He'd fight at a change in the wind, and no one ever accused him of fighting fair. He looked like an Indian—tall, dark, lots of black hair, and them shoulders like a bull.

They named me Delano, after that Roosevelt that was President then, but I always been called Del. Along about the time I turned thirteen, it occurred to me that I was going to look just like him. I started to sprout that year, and people took to shaking their heads when I passed by.

"Lord, Lord, gonna be another Bull," they'd say.

I was working in the fields that summer for an old farmer named Monroe, and I started wondering how I felt about all that.

Daddy was a handsome man. Mama had taught me to respect him because he was my daddy, but I began to think that summer. He never took me hunting or gigging frogs like the other boys. Once I thought about it, I wasn't even sure he liked me all that much. He called me a sissy because Mama sent me to school and church. We didn't have nice things like other folks because he never worked—Mama cried every Christmas when the church folks came with boxes of food and old clothes. I'd always been proud that Daddy could whip anybody around, but I remembered folks saying he was a bully, that he never fought a man who wasn't scared of him. And I didn't see other women walking around with bruises and shiners like Mama did. While old man Monroe's mule pulled me around the fields that summer, I started to think I might look like Daddy, but I sure wasn't certain I wanted to *be* like him.

One day in the middle of all this thinking, I came home from a hot day in the fields and Mama was waiting for me on the front porch with a glass of cold cider. She looked at me and wrinkled her nose.

"You smell like an old horse, honey. You don't get supper till you take a bath."

That cider cut hills and hollers in about a bushel of dust caked in my gullet. "That was real good, Mama. Thank you."

"You feel like a hot supper?" She sighed. "I been canning all day. Not sure I do."

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I stood up. "Anything's fine." We were both on the top step, and all of a sudden I noticed she was looking up at me—not much, but a little. "Look, Mama, I'm bigger than you."

I guess I looked so surprised she laughed. "Well, sure you are. You been busting out of your clothes all year."

We were grinning at one another when a car came down the street and stopped by our fence. Mama stopped grinning when she saw who it was. Her eyes got a funny, watching look.

It was a county sheriff's car. Deputy Bobby Cole got out of it. "Afternoon, Leona, Del," he said.

Mama nodded. "Afternoon, Bobby. Haven't seen you in a while."

"Bull around?" He had on sunglasses, so I couldn't see his eyes, but it seemed to me he was looking around the yard and at the windows of our house.

Mama gave a tight little laugh. "I haven't seen him since this morning. Don't know where he's got to."

Bobby came around the front of his car. The gate stuck like it always did, but he pulled it free. He stopped at the foot of the steps.

"Like to talk to you, then, if it's all right."

"Why, surely," Mama said. "Can I get you a glass of cider? It's cold."

"No, thank you. Del, I'll speak with your mama in private if you don't mind."

"Go take your bath, honey," Mama said before I could say anything. "I'll get your supper in a minute."

I went out back, shucked my clothes, and got into the washtub of water Mama had warmed in the sun. Something didn't feel right. Since Hickory wasn't big enough to have its own police, the county sheriff's office in Spooner had charge of us. Being a Hickory boy himself, Bobby Cole looked after things. I'd known Bobby my whole life. He and Daddy had grown up together and was thick for a while when they was boys—I'd heard stories about some of the hell they raised. Everybody liked Bobby. He was tall and easy-moving—he had nice quiet eyes. He'd been by our house before to pass the time, but today seemed different. I wondered if his call had something bad to do with Daddy.

It took a while to get the dirt off. Then I took my clean pants off the clothesline, washed the dirty ones in my bathwater, and hung them up to dry. Supper was on the table when I went inside. Mama's eyes looked a little pink, but she didn't say anything. We sat down and started to eat.

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"What did Bobby want?" I asked finally.

She gave me a little smile. "See how we're getting on, I guess," she said. After I didn't say anything back, she looked down and studied the cold ham on her plate. "Well, too, he was telling me about some places that's had things stolen lately—tools, tires, and such. He wanted—you know, he thought your daddy might have heard something about it."

"Why'd he think that?"

"Well, I don't know." She was still looking at her plate. "Maybe because Bull gets around the county so much. And him and Bobby being old friends, he was probably hoping your daddy could help him out."

Daddy didn't come home for two more days. When he did, he was driving a new truck, a black one. It had homemade wooden rails rigged up almost to the roof of the cab. I was in bed, and pretty soon I heard him hitting her again. I just laid there, listening to her crying through the wall.

He was still asleep when I got up just before sunrise. Mama's face was cut in two places. She handed me my sack lunch and a biscuit for breakfast. When I left, neither one of us had said a word.

Old man Monroe came out of his house just as I was harnessing the mule. "I heard your daddy's got himself a new truck," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Where you suppose he got the money to buy it?"

Monroe wore an old felt hat day and night—I never seen him without it. He treated me right and paid a fair wage. I pulled up the mule and lied. "I believe I heard him and Mama talking about a fine new job he had."

As I walked away, he called after me. "You're a good worker, boy. I'm counting on you not to let me down."

I felt bad all day. Mama had really pounded it into me about lying.

I felt worse when I came down the street toward home that evening. Daddy was sitting on the front porch. He was drinking and he called out when he seen me coming.

"Come on up here, Del. I want to talk to you."

I always moved careful when I got close to Daddy. He had that air about him—you weren't sure what he'd do from one minute to the next. He was sitting in Mama's old rocker with his feet up on the railing. It struck me every time I got close how big he was, all meat and muscle—his clothes looked like they was straining to hold him in.

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"Hi, Daddy." I hunkered on the bottom step, about as far away as I could get and still be polite.

He looked at me nice and friendly. "Boy, you've sure growed up this year."

"Yes, sir. Three inches so far."

"Your mama still taking you to church every Sunday?"

"Yes, sir."

He tipped his jar and slugged some down. He looked at me. His eyes was black, shiny hard. I always felt he could see right into my insides.

"It's about time you quit that," he said, soft. "You're getting to be a man." He downed another swallow. "You still working for Earl Monroe?"

"Yes, sir."

I was tired. I wanted to have my supper. Daddy gazed out into the yard.

"You just might have to quit on Earl Monroe," he said. "I got some things for you to do."

"I like old man Monroe. It's a good job." I was careful to say it reasonable.

Daddy smiled down at me. He had big white teeth—he surely was handsome when he smiled. "You'll do what your daddy says," he said, still friendly.

Then, before I could blink, he was up. He looked like a tree standing on the porch. "I got things to do." He didn't look at me. "We'll talk about this later."

The truck churned gravel and was gone. Not a minute passed before Mama appeared at the screen door. I knew she'd been listening.

"Pay no mind, Del," she said. "He'll forget it tomorrow." I could tell she didn't believe it, and neither did I.

He hadn't come home again when a couple of days later I was dogging along the road going home from work and Bobby Cole pulled up beside me. He leaned over and opened the car door.

"Get in, Del," he said. He pulled over to the side of the road and we sat there for a minute. "How you doing?"

"All right," I said. "I got a job this summer."

"I heard that. Earl Monroe says you do a man's job, too."

Then it was quiet again. "Bull's still beating on your mama, isn't he?" He said it casual, like he was talking about the weather.

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There I was again. I'd already told one fat lie that week. "They fight sometimes."

Bobby turned toward me, his arm on the back of the seat, not quite touching my shoulder.

"Del, I'm going to talk to you like a man. It's not right. He's been hurting your mama for years and we can't do anything about it because she won't swear out a complaint. She's afraid, like everybody else." I knew he was looking at me, but I didn't say anything.

"I'll tell you something else," Bobby said. "And this is between you and me, all right? You've surely heard that somebody's been stealing around here—and selling the things for money somewhere, I suppose. Well, last night a farmer over by Spooner almost caught him. Had the tires already off his car and was trying to break a window to get at the car radio when the farmer came out. Got close enough to see who it was and got himself shot for his trouble—winged in the arm. Now, he won't tell me who shot him because he's scared to, but somebody else saw a truck going hellbent along the road out there right after. It was a new black one. It's my job to find out who belongs to that truck, and I'll have to do something about it when I do. Sometimes you just let bad things go on too long, you understand?"

I did. After a minute I said, "It would be hard for you if it was an old friend, I bet."

Bobby looked at me for a minute. "Yes, it would. Harder than you think. You go on home now. Just think about what I said."

I thought about it. I thought about it when Daddy came home and was hitting Mama that night, and I thought about it when we went to church next day, Mama with bruises all over her arms. I thought about it a lot, but I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

A few mornings later, old man Monroe was waiting for me when I got to work. I could tell something was wrong.

"You can't work for me any more, Del," he said right off. "Sorry, but I want you off my place right now."

I just stood there.

"Somebody took two saddles and the tires off my tractor last night. It was bright moon out and I seen they was driving your daddy's black truck. Now you go home and tell him I won't stand for it. When I finish in the fields today, I'm going to Spooner and turn him in to Sheriff Pike. You tell your daddy that."

Daddy was home when I got there, standing in the back yard

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watching Mama spade up a garden bed. Mama looked up at me, surprised.

"What you doing home, Del? You sick?"

Daddy tipped his jug. He grinned like he already knew what I was about to say.

I looked right at him. "Old man Monroe fired me. He don't want me on his place."

His grin got wider. "Then I guess you'll be able to do those things for me, after all."

I didn't stop to think—I just said it. "Somebody stole from him last night. He's going over to Spooner this evening to tell the sheriff it was you. And I won't ever go stealing for you, so just stop asking."

He had me by the neck before I even saw him move. Just one hand, but he shook me till my head wobbled and my eyes began to cross. I heard the clunk when Mama dropped the spade, but all I could see was Daddy's face close up, and he said to me through his big white teeth, "I'll break you into little pieces, you talk that way again. Don't you accuse me, and don't ever stand up to me, you hear?"

My legs fell out from under me. I went to my knees. He was choking off my wind. It got sudden dark, water was roaring through my ears. Then, just like that, he dropped me.

"I'll finish with you later," he said, and went off around the corner of the house.

Mama helped me up. "Oh, Del, oh baby," she kept saying.

After I quit gulping for air, I felt better.

"Go on," Mama said. "Leave. Go somewhere till he cools off."

All I could do was shake my head.

Tears started to slide down her face. "Oh, Lord," she said, "he never turned on you before."

In a few minutes the truck started up and drove away. I made Mama go inside and I spaded all day, whacking that dirt like it was the devil himself.

It was almost dark when he came home. Mama and I were in the front room. He swore at the gate when it stuck. I heard him wrenching at it, then the gate hit the front of the house with a terrible bang. Mama and I stood up.

My heart was busting right out of my ribs. "We could run."

Mama just looked at me. "Where to?" she said.

He was smiling when he come through the front door. He smelled

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bad, like kerosene. The first thing he did was fix those black eyes on me.

"Tomorrow I got a little job for you."

His voice was gentle. He was a lot drunker. Quiet drunk—that's when he scared me most.

I could hardly get my voice out. "What about old man Monroe? What if he goes to the sheriff like he said?"

He didn't move his gaze off me. "Don't you worry about Earl Monroe. Nobody goes against me and don't regret it. Earl's got other things to think about tonight. Right now, for instance, his house is afire."

Mama's breath just shot out. "Oh, Bull!"

Daddy was looking right inside me. "You'll do what I say."

Sweat slicked down my ribs. "No," I said. "You can't make me steal."

"Bull, please," Mama said.

His arm caught her across the face. She flew backward and hit the wall so hard the house shook, then she slid down to the floor, her eyes stary like she was blind.

I couldn't move, just watched blood running from Mama's nose. Daddy hadn't moved anything except his arm. He didn't even glance around at her.

I don't know where my voice came from—not from me. "And don't hit Mama any more!" it said.

Daddy's eyes lit up. He smiled, almost looked friendly. Then he hit me in the belly, knocked the wind clean out. It doubled me over, and before I could get my breath back he started hitting me in the face. I was on the floor before I knew it, and he came right after me. I couldn't get up and I couldn't fight back—I was crabbing across the floor trying to get away, but he kept coming. He hit me everywhere he could reach, and when he wasn't hitting he kicked me—in the belly, the ribs, the back, it didn't seem to matter.

Mama was screaming, but I couldn't see her because of the blood in my eyes. It seemed like this went on for a long time. I never made a sound, but I was about to give up, just lie there and let him kill me, when I heard him let out a grunt and the hitting stopped. There was a scuffle going on. I wiped away enough blood to see that Mama had one of the sticks we used to prop windows open and she was laying into him with it for all she was worth.

She looked wild. She was screaming, "Leave him alone!" and she

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got some good licks in before Daddy wrenched the stick away and knocked her down.

Then he set in on her. If he hadn't been so drunk, she probably never would have gotten away, but she did, and she ran out into the back yard. Daddy was breathing like he couldn't get air, and swaying from side to side, but he stumbled right out after her. I wanted to go help Mama more than I ever wanted anything, but the pain was so bad I just laid on the floor and cried like a kid.

After a long time, the kitchen door opened. I prayed that he'd kill me quick so I'd stop hurting, but when I looked up Mama was standing in the doorway. She was wiping her hands on the skirt of her dress, wiping hard, like she was trying to dig into her skin.

I grabbed hold of the sofa and tried to sit up. She made me mad, just standing there. "Run!" I said. My ribs felt full of knives. "Get help!"

"Del," she said. She was whispering—I could barely hear. "He's dead. I killed him with the spade."

I didn't believe her. He'd be back in a minute, we had to run. I was trying to haul myself up when there came a step on the front porch and Bobby was standing at the screen door. He didn't see me, hunkered off to the side.

"Leona," he said, "I'm here for Bull. I know he's home—his truck's out front. Earl Monroe swears Bull set his house on fire. I'm taking him in this time."

Mama didn't say anything, just looked at him through the screen. Bobby must have caught onto the expression on her face. "What's going on?" he said, and stepped inside.

When he saw me, his eyes shrunk down to little dots. He picked me up like a baby and laid me on the sofa. His face was the color of Mama's white sheets. "Where is he?" he said.

"Out back," Mama whispered. "He was chasing me and he fell down in the yard. I picked up the spade and hit him in the head. I kept on hitting till I was tired. He's dead, Bobby, you'll see."

Bobby tore out the back door. Mama kept wiping her hands on her skirt. "He hurt you, honey," she whispered.

Bobby didn't come back in for a long while. When he did, he still looked white and kind of sick. "He's dead, Leona," he said.

Things got blurry for a while after that. Bobby went out to his car and talked on the radio. After a while, Dr. Wilbur came. He said he thought I might have a cracked rib or two—he put some stitches in my head, taped up my ribs, and I began to feel a little better.

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When they came to take Daddy away, I watched through the window. They had him covered up, so I couldn't see anything. None of it seemed real.

After Dr. Wilbur left, Bobby stayed a little longer.

"I don't like to leave you two here alone tonight," he said.

For the first time, Mama's expression changed. She looked surprised. "Don't I have to go to jail?"

Bobby hunkered down beside her and took hold of her hands. I was so glad to have someone stop that wiping she was doing.

"It was self-defense, Leona," he said. "You're not going to any jail."

Mama looked back at him. "Killing is a mortal sin."

Bobby hung his head for a minute. "Not always," he said finally. Then he had to leave, and he made me promise to watch out for Mama.

She went to bed, but I knew she wouldn't sleep, not even with the pills Dr. Wilbur left for her. She lay all night staring at the ceiling. I sat up with her, and sometimes she cried without making a sound. The only thing she said was, "It's a sin in the eyes of God. No matter how I look at it, it comes out the same."

Along about sunup she finally fell asleep. As for me, my eyes was glued wide open. I went out to the kitchen and looked at the yard where it happened. Religion must have been different for Mama than it was for me. I couldn't see that Daddy ever did anything good—all he wanted was to hurt people. I did some deep thinking, and right after the sun came up I went next door and asked Mrs. Arndot to stay with Mama while I was gone.

I hitched a ride at the edge of town, and I was waiting at the sheriff's office in Spooner when Bobby Cole came to open up. He looked real tired.

"What're you doing here, Del?"

"I got to talk to you," I said.

He went out and got coffee for him and a doughnut for me, but I couldn't eat it.

"All right," he said, sitting behind his desk. "What's on your mind?"

"Mama didn't kill Daddy last night. I did. He started hitting her and I fought him. He whipped me good, but when he fell down in the yard I picked up the spade and beat him dead. That's how it happened. I guess you'll have to put me in jail for it."

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It came out just the way I planned it.

Bobby set his coffee down. "Your mama says she did it."

"She's saying that to protect me."

"I don't know. Sounded to me like she was convinced. How you think you're going to unconvince her?"

I hadn't thought of that. I looked back at him and couldn't come up with a word to say.

"Didn't happen that way, Del," he said.

"But she can't live with it. She laid awake all night, and that's all she said, about how she'd done a mortal sin."

Bobby looked down at his desk. "She'll probably get over that."

"No, sir. She won't."

Just then the door opened and Sheriff Pike pushed his big belly through. "Well, good morning," he said. "Didn't expect to find anyone here so early."

I figured *he* might believe me. "Sheriff, I killed my daddy last night, not Mama. I come here to confess."

Sheriff Pike's eyebrows went up under the brim of his hat. He looked at Bobby.

"We've got a little problem here, John," Bobby said. "Better pull up a chair."

When the sheriff sat down beside me, I told it again. After I finished, he chewed his lip a little like he was considering.

"Loney Kirkshaw's a mighty small woman to kill a moose like Bull. Could be what you say is true."

"No," Bobby said. "That's not how it was."

The sheriff looked thoughtful. "They were both inside when you got there, you said. Could've been either one. Both took a beating and nobody standing over the body."

Bobby took a deep, slow breath. "He's protecting her, John. I tried to explain it's a simple case of self-defense."

Sheriff Pike looked over at me. "That's true, son. Everyone knew how he treated your mama."

"Still and all," I said, "I'm the one who done it, not her."

The sheriff nodded. "You're trying to do a fine thing. But the truth of the matter is, your daddy was no good. Nobody's going to be heartbroken that he's dead. We don't want anyone to suffer over this, you understand?"

"Mama's suffering. She can't undo a mortal sin."

After a minute, he sighed. "Oh, so that's it," he said.

"See, maybe she just thinks she done it, but she didn't. I did."

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Bobby hadn't said anything for a while. Now he stirred in his chair. "Well, you almost got it right, Del," he said in his quiet voice. "She thinks she did it. But she didn't, and neither did you. I did."

There wasn't a sound in that office for a full minute. Everybody just seemed to stop breathing. Bobby looked Sheriff Pike right in the eye. "Leona hurt him, all right, but he was alive when I got there. I don't know how bad he was. But I looked at him, and it seemed to me that here was something that needed finishing. Best for everyone. So I picked up the spade and finished it." He took a deep breath. "It seemed the right thing to do."

The sheriff said, "Aw, come on, Bobby."

"No, it's true. I've been worrying with it all night. At first I thought I would be all right—clear self-defense for Leona. I didn't want to lose my job, John. I like it—think I do some good. But I hadn't counted on Leona's religion. She can't carry that load. So I'm ready to hand you my badge."

Sheriff Pike sort of fell back in his chair. "Whatever would make you do such a thing?"

Bobby thought a minute. "I'll tell you something, John, something nobody knew but Bull and me. I've loved Leona most of my life. I was too bashful to tell her, but one time I told Bull. Well, you know him. Couldn't let things alone. He bragged to me that he'd marry her, and he did. I don't believe he ever loved her. That's been sticking me somewhere all these years. All the times he beat her and he was tearing up the county and we couldn't bring him in because no one would testify against him—"

He stopped a minute to clear his throat.

"So when I saw her and the boy last night—what he'd done to them—and then I saw that he was still alive, well, it just seemed a shame. So I picked up the spade and ended it, that's all."

I remembered how he'd looked when he came back in from the yard to say that Daddy was dead.

Sheriff Pike leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "Well, well, well," he said. "It's no lie that Bull was getting worse. I believe we had a loose cannon on our hands. We know he shot a man, but we can't prove it. Maybe he'd have killed the next one. Or his wife and boy. And he might have gotten away with Earl Monroe's fire."

He chewed his lip some more. "Bobby, if you'd met up with him some night and he pulled his gun on you, would you have killed him?"

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Bobby looked like he didn't understand. "If I had to."

"In the line of duty?"

"Yes."

"You were on duty last night."

"But he didn't pull a gun."

"You went there to arrest him."

"But for Earl Monroe's—"

"And you found his family all beat up."

My head was swinging back and forth between them. Something was happening, but I didn't know what. Bobby didn't seem to, either.

"That's right," he said.

"He might've killed them if you hadn't shown up."

"Not with him lying out in—"

"*Hurt*, you said, you didn't know how bad. If he could've gotten up, what do you suppose he'd have done to Loney for laying into him with a spade?"

Nobody said anything. I was pretty sure we all had an idea. The sheriff sat up and looked hard across the desk at Bobby. "Did he have his gun on last night?"

"No."

"Did you?"

Bobby looked completely lost. "Sure, I did."

"What would you have done if you'd hunkered over Bull, checking if he was dead, and he'd rared up, pulled your gun out of its holster, and turned it on you? You know he'd have fired it."

Bobby's eyes cleared a little. "Are you—"

"Seems to me," Sheriff Pike said, "an officer who's lost his pistol would defend himself with the nearest thing at hand. That being the spade, of course. Quick thinking, if you ask me."

It finally came to me. Bobby, too. He half rose out of his chair. "But, that's not—"

The sheriff held up his hand. "As sheriff, considering all the facts, it's clearcut to me. Bull Kirkshaw was killed by an on-duty officer acting in self-defense. I believe this case is closed."

"Nobody'll believe it," Bobby said after a minute.

"Nobody'll care, that's the sorry truth. Bobby, I've known you a lot of years. I'd sure hate to lose a man like you."

For the first time in a while, they seemed to remember me. The sheriff laid his hand on my arm.

"You understand all this, son?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

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"You got any problems with it? Your mama can ease her mind now."

I thought a minute. There was a knot of something in my throat. "Last night, when I was sitting up with Mama, I wished I *had* done it. It shamed me that I let him hit her so hard."

Sheriff Pike squeezed my arm. "You're going to be a fine man, Del Kirkshaw. But you have to understand this, too. What was said here today is between you, me, and Bobby. Nobody else, agreed?"

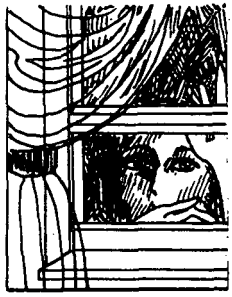
"Agreed."

He stood up. "Now, you take this boy home, Bobby. Explain to Loney how it really happened. And if you go nice and slow for a while, you might get your second chance with her."

Bobby turned color right up to his hair. "I'd sure like to make things up to her if I can." He shook Sheriff Pike's hand. "Thank you, John."

I'll never forget that ride back to Hickory. We didn't talk much, but every time I looked over at Bobby he was looking back at me. I surely did like his eyes.

I didn't know what he was thinking. I thought about Mama. This might be the biggest lie I'd ever tell. But I was glad she hadn't done it. I was glad I didn't do it, either. If someone had to kill Bull Kirkshaw, I was glad it was Bobby Cole.



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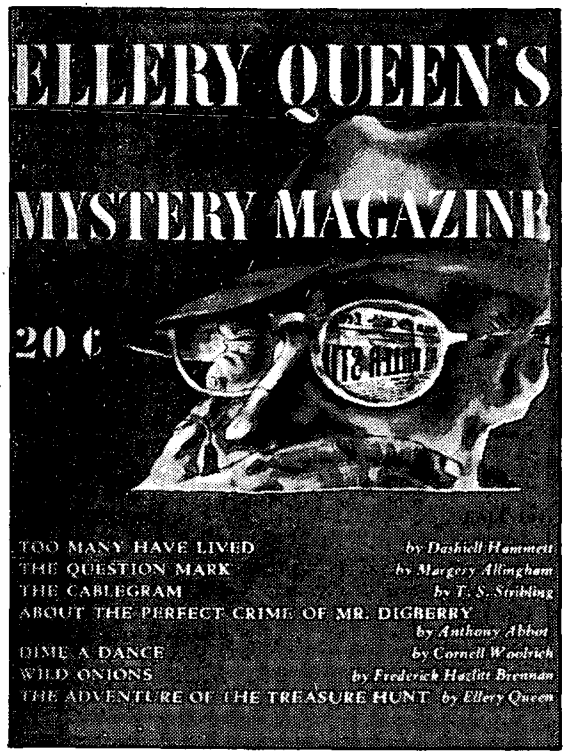
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a ***NEW*** short story by

SHIZUKO NATSUKI

"Excuse me, but who exactly are you?" Ose asked the woman on the phone.

"I told you. I'm a customer who drops into your place occasionally. Actually, I have to confess that I'm a great fan of yours, Mr. Ose."

"A fan? You're a fan of mine?" In all his thirty-eight years, no one had ever said anything like this to him.

"Ose," she said moments later, "I have a feeling you will listen seriously to a desperate request put to you by a silly woman."

Last year France's prestigious Les Prix du Roman D'Aventures was presented to Shizuko Natsuki for her novel, La promesse de l'ombre. *It has in the past been awarded to other such outstanding EQMM contributors as Ruth Rendell, Peter Lovesey, and June Thomson. It is a fitting tribute to one of the genre's most resourceful and hard-working writers . . .*

THE WOMAN ON THE PHONE

by SHIZUKO NATSUKI

"Hello, is this Ose?"

The first time he heard the voice, Ose had a feeling there was something too smooth about it.

"Is this Ose Yukichi?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"I hope I haven't gotten you out of bed."

"No, no—of course not. I was already up." He looked out the window of his cramped room and squinted at the brilliance of the morning sunlight. He tried to make his voice sound as if he were alert.

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The clock over the cupboard showed 11:30. Still, it was something of an overstatement to say "of course not." In fact, it had only been fifteen minutes since he'd gotten out of bed and come downstairs.

"Anyway, please excuse me. I realize that you open your place at two o'clock and I wanted to call you before then."

The woman's voice was sweet and intimate, so Ose relaxed. "Actually, no one ever comes here before three at the earliest. All I have to do is sweep the place out, empty the ashtrays, and things like that."

"No wonder whenever I go there it looks so tidy."

"Oh, you're a customer, then?"

"Oh, yes. But I can't get to your place all that often."

Nevertheless, she seemed to know a great deal about him. As she chattered on, it became clear that she knew he was separated from his wife and children, and that except for a woman who came in to help in the afternoons he ran his Mah-jongg parlor by himself.

"I notice the typhoon damaged your roof. It must be a problem getting that repaired."

"Not really. It's already been taken care of. Since then, we had a windstorm that was even worse, but I've got it patched together for the time being. This place is about to fall apart, anyway."

The two-story building which included both the Mah-jongg parlor and his living quarters was a flimsy wooden structure that had been built thirty years ago. The roof had been tilted out of shape by the typhoon and had continued to leak even before the windstorm a few weeks ago that had further damaged it. Ose had discussed the matter of repairing it with a carpenter who was a long-time customer, but his advice was that it was time to tear the whole building down and put up something new. He estimated that would cost about fifteen million yen.*

Six years ago, Ose had given up his job as a truck driver and taken out a bank loan to buy this place. He was still paying off the mortgage. There was no way he could afford to tear down and rebuild. On top of that, he had an expensive gambling habit, so that his debts were snowballing.

The woman on the phone was sympathetic. "No matter how much money a person has, it seems there's never enough. But if you'll let me, I'd like to help you out."

"Excuse me, but who exactly are you?"

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"I told you. I'm a customer who drops into your place occasionally. Actually, I have to confess that I'm a great fan of yours, Mr. Ose."

"A fan? You're a fan of mine?" In all his thirty-eight years, no one had ever said anything like this to him.

"You're just so masculine, and the way you move is so decisive and energetic."

"Well, maybe that's because when I was younger I used to work out at a boxing gym regularly."

"I might have expected as much. Ose, I have a feeling you will listen seriously to a desperate request put to you by a silly woman."

"A desperate request? What are you talking about? You say you're an occasional customer. May I ask how old you are?"

"Make a guess."

She seemed to be young and her voice sounded sexy. She had a sort of nasal sound when she spoke and a way of emphasizing certain words which was common with young people these days. Still, it is difficult to judge a person's age by their voice on the telephone. "I can't, really," he said. "Why don't you just tell me about this desperate request you have?" He tried to make his own voice sound as masculine and attractive as possible.

For a time there was silence, then she said, "I'm a wealthy person. I have more money than I could ever possibly spend by myself. I inherited it from my father, who founded a number of very successful companies." Suddenly her voice dropped lower and she said, "But no matter how much money I have, I'm still just a poor, helpless woman. By myself I am not able to get revenge on a man who took advantage of me." There was a long pause and then Ose realized she was sobbing. "The request I have to make is to ask you to carry out the proper punishment for this man."

"You say he took advantage of you. What exactly did he do?"

"It was something so terrible I am still unable to talk about it. The point is, he cheated me and took advantage of me. He willfully betrayed the love I had for him. He was so cruel—just thinking about what he did makes me furious." Her voice trembled as she spoke, then she broke down completely.

"I'm sorry," said Ose. "You seem to be a lovely young woman—it's a shame he's put you through this. If I can help you out in any way, I'll be glad to. What is it you want me to do exactly?"

Once more there was a period of silence. When the woman spoke again there was a hard edge to her voice. "Mr. Ose, please listen carefully to what I have to say. You are a real man—I know that

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if you can fully appreciate the chagrin I have endured and the depth of feeling with which I bring this request to you, and if you think you are strong enough to do what I ask, then I will depend on you completely."

"Yes, I think I *can* understand how you feel, but can you be more specific about what you want from me?"

"What I want is for you to kill that man."

Ose, startled, thought maybe she was not fully serious, or perhaps this was just a manner of speaking. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Or why you've come to me with this."

"Call it telepathy if you wish. I sense that you are a person who will do this for me. Naturally I don't expect you to do it for nothing. As I said, I have plenty of money. I'll pay you well for getting rid of this man."

Ose failed to respond to this, so the woman continued, "I've looked into the matter. In the Philippines they pay the equivalent of five million yen to have someone eliminated. But I will pay you ten million yen to do the job."

Without realizing it, Ose was clutching the phone tightly. His palms were sweaty. Earlier the woman's voice had been emotional and teary—now it was cold and businesslike. Ose could tell from the way she spoke that she was totally serious.

"But you put this to me so suddenly," he said. "You seem to know a great deal about me, but I don't know anything about you. I don't even know who you are. Before I make any commitment, I want to find out more about you."

"No—it is better if we know as little as possible about each other. Think about the cases you've read about where one person asks another to kill a third party. Cases like that are in the papers all the time—and usually the murderer has been apprehended. Why? Because the person who did the murder and the person who asked to have it done know each other or have something to link them besides the murder. If the person who actually does the killing has no motive for killing that person but is known to associate with a person who may have such a motive, then the truth is liable to come to light."

"I see." Ose had to agree that the woman was right—it would be safer if he didn't know who she was.

"Nevertheless," she said, "even if the person who requests the crime and the person who commits the crime have no connection,

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the police may still be able to link them. This could happen if you were to know anything about me."

"Okay, let's assume for the moment that I would agree to what you ask. What if then you refused to pay the money you promised me? I don't know your name or your address or anything about you."

"I will give you an advance payment."

"That would be no guarantee you'd pay me the rest later."

"That's true. But by the same token, I will pay you part of the money in advance with no guarantee that you will really go through with it. I will just have to trust you and you will have to trust me."

"But you know who and where I am and you would always be able to exact revenge if I took your money and didn't do anything." Ose was beginning to feel anxious. Something about the way the woman spoke made him sure she would be capable of such a thing.

"I wouldn't be able to ask you to do this if I didn't know *something* about you," she said. "But you should feel encouraged by the fact that I'm going to pay you part of the money in advance. I have done some research and learned that the usual practice is to pay twenty or thirty percent of the fee in advance and the remainder after the job is done. I'm offering you five million yen in advance—that is fifty percent. I swear to God I will keep my part of the arrangement."

"Swear to God, huh?"

"As I said, we both have to trust each other. As proof of my trust, I am willling to pay you half the fee in advance."

"But in order to pay me, we have to meet."

"No. I have thought of a way to give you the money without our having to meet." The woman laughed coquettishly and said, "About three hundred meters north of where you live is the Kozakura Day Care Center. At night, it is pitch-black there and completely deserted. There are no benches on the grounds, so we don't have to worry about lovers lingering there. There are a sandbox and some swings and in one corner there are three large ceramic figurines. One of them is shaped like a duck. I will leave the five million yen inside that one."

"When?"

"Tomorrow night. You should plan to pick up the money at two in the morning on March twenty-fifth. It will be in a paper bag."

"Two A.M."

"Yes. That will give you a day and a half to think the matter over. If you decide to go through with it, come pick up the money."

"You tell me to consider the matter carefully, but how can I? I

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don't even know anything about the man you want me to kill or how you propose I do it."

"I'll tell you about him. You may want to take some notes."

At 7:30 on Friday evening, March 27, the body of Akagi Keiji was discovered in his second-floor apartment in an older building about half a mile from a bustling entertainment district of bars and clubs. He was thirty-six years old. He was discovered by a hostess who tended bar and served drinks in his bar. It was Akagi's usual practice to show up at the bar around six o'clock, but on that day he hadn't arrived by seven. They had tried telephoning, but there was no answer, so the mama-san had sent a hostess to see what was keeping him. The hostess had knocked on Akagi's door and, when there was no response, tried the door and found it unlocked. She entered the apartment and discovered Akagi sprawled on the floor in the kitchen, dead.

Akagi had lived alone in the small, two-room apartment. Everything was scattered about and she couldn't tell if this was just the way he had lived or if his murderer had ransacked the place. He was wearing pajamas and a bathrobe. There were signs that he had been struck with a blunt instrument on the head and one shoulder, and he had been strangled with a nylon stocking.

The time of death was estimated to be about one that morning.

Because Akagi lived alone and had no close friends or relatives, it was impossible to determine whether or not anything had been taken from the apartment.

The neighborhood was composed mostly of small apartment buildings and love hotels, and most of the people who lived here were involved somehow or other in the entertainment business. Since the murder had occurred just around the time bar hostesses are returning home, it was possible that one of them may have noticed someone entering or leaving Akagi's apartment. The investigation began following two tracks—one was to question people living nearby and the other was to check out the victim's personal relationships.

At the club the victim owned, he himself tended bar and there was also a mama-san and three hostesses. It was a fairly small middle-class sort of place. On the night the murder occurred, Akagi had left the club at 12:15 A.M. to walk home. Although he had a small car, he always walked to and from work. At his pace, it took about fifteen minutes to walk from the club to his apartment. It was

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calculated that the assailant must have committed the crime very shortly after Akagi returned home.

At a meeting of the investigative team on the evening of March 28, each section reported on its part of the investigation.

"We have to consider the possibility that the killer and his victim may have returned home together, as well as the possibility that the killer was there waiting for Akagi," an officer said. "If the killer was someone Akagi knew, he would have let the killer into the apartment easily. If Akagi did not know the killer, the killer would have had to use some ruse to get him to open the door or else had to force his way into the apartment."

"Do I understand that we don't have any eyewitnesses and haven't turned up anyone who heard an argument in progress?" asked Inspector Sugi, who was in charge of the entire investigation.

"I'm afraid you're right. The woman who lives in the apartment next to the victim's works as a bar hostess, but she spent most of that night elsewhere with one of her customers and didn't return home until about three in the morning. Opposite the apartment building is a snack shop which stays open until two. From there, one can see part of the stairs leading to the three-story building. That night there were quite a few customers in the snack bar, but both the street and the stairs were quite dark and so far we haven't found anyone who remembers seeing anything of interest."

An officer assigned to investigate the victim's background said, "We have learned that he was born here in the city. After graduating from high school, he attended a private college, but dropped out after two years. After that, he spent a couple of years working as a television actor. We've learned he was addicted to women and was often in trouble with them. Eventually they cut him from the television show on which he was a regular and he wound up back here. He drifted from job to job and bought this club about a year and a half ago."

"I remember seeing him on TV," another detective said.

"Even after he returned here, he was extravagant in the way he went through women. After his experience in the world of television, he was a pretty suave character and sometimes even cast himself as an intellectual. His way of treating women, however, was abominable. Whether it was a married woman or a career woman made little difference to him. Even the bar hostesses—he seduced them all. There is a rumor that he had an affair with the mama-san of the bar he owned."

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"It looks as if passion is the common denominator here," said Sugi. Most of the officers agreed with his assessment.

"Nevertheless, Akagi was a hundred and eighty centimeters tall, and although he was skinny and weak he was big-boned. For someone to strangle him to death would take some doing. It is doubtful that a woman could have done it." The officer who raised this point represented the prefectural police and was naturally the center of attention.

"It appears that the first weapon the assailant used was a wrench or something like that," Sugi told him. "So far in our investigation we have turned up no such weapon. But if the assailant had concealed the weapon and hit the victim unprepared, he or she might have disabled him long enough to strangle him. It is not entirely unreasonable to think a woman might have done it. Though judging from the position and angle of the wounds, it would have taken a rather tall woman to do this. In any case, while it is possible for a woman to have done it, the most likely prospect is that it was a man."

As the investigation continued into Akagi Keiji's background, the police turned up more and more women who had had an affair with him. There were the mama-san and the hostesses of the places where he had worked previously, the wife of the manager of a local industrial firm, a radio announcer, artists, and so on. Both among the women he had loved and discarded and among those with whom he continued a relationship up to the time of his murder, there were more than a few who were very bitter about the way he had treated them.

It also turned out that he was destitute and had no means to support his flashy lifestyle, and that he had connections with a number of gangsters. It was supposed that problems over these financial matters and connections may have led to his murder.

Eventually all the many suspects were listed and brought in for repeated questioning, but no one of them seemed more suspect than another and so no arrests could be made.

Then, on March 30, the third day after the murder, the investigative team was still vigorously pursuing leads when a letter arrived at police headquarters.

The stationery was identified as a product made and sold locally and the letter had been posted at the city's central post office. It was addressed to the investigative team and the return address merely

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said, "From an Eyewitness." These had been scribbled hastily in ballpoint pen.

The contents of the letter were written on two sheets of plain white paper. On the first sheet, written in the same handwriting as the envelope, was the message: "At about one o'clock in the morning of March 27, I was sitting near the window of the small snack bar opposite the apartment building where the bartender was murdered. At that time I saw a man enter and leave the stairway leading to the apartment building. I would guess that he is not yet forty and a well built man about 175 centimeters tall. He wore a brown jacket and dark slacks. When he passed under the streetlight I caught a glimpse of his face and was able to make a sketch of it, which you will find enclosed."

The second sheet of paper was a sketch in colored pencil of a man's face. He had square, angular features and a long jaw. The whites of his eyes were prominent, as was his large, lumpy nose. The face gave the impression of being crude and insensitive. As far as depicting a likeness is concerned, the drawing was meticulously done.

In a sense, the police had no reason to believe that this was the person they were looking for. But they had to assume that the drawing was to some extent accurate, and, in any case, they had nothing else to go on, so they made copies of the sketch and distributed them to police boxes throughout the city. With this in hand, detectives set out once again to make inquiries and see if they could turn up anything.

Eventually, they did find a man who very closely resembled the drawing. He was Ose Yukichi, thirty-eight, the owner of a small building which housed both a Mah-jongg parlor and his own living quarters. It was located about two kilometers from the apartment where the murder occurred.

When the police visited Ose's place and questioned him, he denied any knowledge of a person named Akagi Keiji. "He's not a customer of mine—I've never even met him. As for the apartment building where the crime occurred, all I can say is that I've never been there."

Akagi was known to have played Mah-jongg occasionally, but there was no evidence to suggest he had ever played at Ose's establishment. Nothing emerged to suggest that the two men had even known each other.

On the other hand, Ose had no alibi for the time of the murder. His story was that he had closed his Mah-jongg parlor at 11:30 as usual, taken a bath, and gone to bed. But because he was separated

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from his wife and children and lived alone, there was no one who could substantiate this.

The police took Ose in and grilled him intensely. His fingerprints were compared to the many prints that had been left at the scene of the crime. They turned up three fingerprints in the apartment that matched his.

On March 31, the investigative team received the second letter. Judging from the handwriting, it was thought that the author was the same person who had sent the previous letter. This time the contents were on one page as follows:

"Please forgive me. I have forgotten precisely what it was I wrote to you earlier, but I should also tell you that this man I saw leaving the apartment building was in a great hurry—so much so that he jumped down the last three steps and started away quickly. He appeared to have sharply barked his shin on the stone corner of the building and was limping as he ran away. It appeared to be a painful bruise. I merely pass this along for your information."

When the police looked into the matter, they found that the steps leading up to the apartment building were cornered by two large, ancient blocks of stone.

Ose's home and Mah-jongg parlor were searched. The police turned up nothing out of the ordinary that might have served as the blunt instrument, but they did discover a pair of black trousers with a tear in the fabric at shin height. Several threads found stuck to the stone block turned out to match the fabric of the trousers.

On the evening of April first, Ose Yukichi was once more brought in for questioning. When the police asked him to roll up his pant leg, there was revealed a dark bruise on his right shin.

When Ose continued to plead ignorance concerning Akagi's apartment and its environs, he was confronted with the fact that his fingerprints had been lifted from inside the room and threads from his trousers had been found at the doorway. The evidence was inescapable and late that night he finally crumbled and confessed to Akagi's murder.

His statement was as follows:

"I had learned that Akagi customarily returned to his apartment at around 12:30, so I went there shortly before that time and concealed myself in the nearby darkness.

"He returned home at precisely 12:30 that night and went up to

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his apartment on the second floor. I waited for about fifteen minutes and then went after him, making sure there was no one on the street.

"I pressed the buzzer at Akagi's door, and when he asked me who it was I said, 'The mama-san asked me to bring this over.' When he opened the door to see what it was all about, I shoved my way inside. He was caught offguard and I was able to club him on the shoulder with a pipe wrench I had been holding behind my back. That got him off balance and gave me a chance to hit him again alongside the head. Once he was down and unconscious, I strangled him with a nylon stocking I had brought along.

"I left the apartment right away, but I was in a panic and took the stairs two at a time going down, and stumbled, banging my shin.

"I knew there was a snack bar across the street, but there were lace curtains on the windows, so I couldn't see inside and carelessly assumed that anyone inside couldn't see out. It didn't occur to me that someone might have seen me.

"I ran all the way home, and along the way I got rid of the wrench with my fingerprints on it."

Detectives were dispatched to the place he indicated, where they immediately found the wrench hidden under some boards. There were traces of blood still on the wrench which matched the blood of the victim.

The one problem that remained was the motive for the crime. Throughout the questioning, Ose was resolute in insisting that he had been asked to commit the murder.

"Who asked you to do it?"

"Some woman. I don't know who she is. At around eleven-thirty on the morning of March twenty-third she called me at my home."

He went on to say that he was told he would be given ten million yen if he killed a man she hated. After that, she had described Akagi in detail and had supplied him with precise information about the location of his apartment. She had also suggested that about one o'clock in the morning of March 27 would be the ideal time for the crime.

"It's hard to believe anyone would kill someone just because they were asked to do so by a total stranger," said the investigating police officer.

"Well, she paid me the money in advance."

"How did she do that?"

"There is a child-care center near where I live, and on the play-

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ground there are some cement figurines for the children to crawl through. She said she would leave the money in an envelope hidden in one of them, and that I was to pick it up at two in the morning of the twenty-fifth."

"Did you make the pickup?"

"I was curious to see what sort of person this woman was, so I went there some two hours earlier than she had said, but she never showed up. When two o'clock came around, I went and looked in the figurine—what I found was a message saying the money was behind a nearby storage shed. When I went and looked, there it was, in a brown envelope. But I never got a look at the woman who had left it."

"Do you still have the note she left?"

"No. I was afraid it would be incriminating, so I got rid of it right away."

"But she did deliver on the money?"

"Yes, she did. Five million yen. I have all kinds of debts to repay, but I was afraid it would arouse suspicion if I suddenly paid off everything, so I still have most of the money in my apartment. I probably have four million, six hundred thousand of it."

In fact, that was almost exactly the amount of money the investigators had found when they'd searched his house.

Continued investigation revealed no other direct motive for Ose to kill Akagi. No matter how often he was questioned, Ose never changed his story, and there was no reason to think he was making it up. At the same time, he knew nothing about the woman who had contracted the murder—not her name, her address, her age or occupation. "She told me she had loved Akagi and that he had scorned her love and betrayed her and she held a deep grudge against him. Her voice was really special—seductive, you know? I'm sure I'd recognize it if I ever heard it again."

The investigative team was dubious about Ose's assertion, but they went ahead and contacted every woman they knew of who had been romantically involved with Akagi. Each time they telephoned one of them, they had Ose listening on an extension.

Among the women they contacted was a radio announcer noted for her attractive voice, but as Ose listened he shook his head. None of them sounded like the woman he remembered. "She said that if I did the job she'd call me back within ten days and arrange to pay me the rest of the money—she swore she would."

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Rather than suspecting the woman of treachery, Ose seemed to believe she would follow through with her part of the deal. He showed every sign of being willing to wait out the ten days in custody. The investigative team made the situation clear to the news media and got them to promise not to leak the news that Ose had been arrested.

The following day, the police made a startling discovery. About seven months previously, on Sunday, August 24, a compact car had gone off the highway embankment some twenty kilometers along the coast from the city, plunging down the cliff and smashing on the rocks. The driver of the car was killed. He was identified as an employee of an insurance company in the suburbs. His name was Teiichi Hishikawa, forty-four years old. It was calculated that the time of death was between three and four in the morning.

According to his wife, Umeko, Hishikawa enjoyed sea-fishing and had left home at about 3:30 that morning in order to meet a chartered fishing boat scheduled to leave at 5:00 A.M. The night before, he'd had to work late at the office and had returned home around midnight, so he had had less than three hours of sleep and appeared to be still sleepy when he left the house.

At the site of the accident, the highway goes down a hill and makes a sharp curve. At first, it was supposed that he had simply fallen asleep at the wheel and driven off the road. Immediately after the accident, however, the forty-year-old widow had moved in with her lover, Yoda Hiroshi, who was two years younger than she. When it came to light that Hishikawa had a sixty-million-yen insurance policy through his company that paid a double-indemnity death benefit of 120-million yen for an accidental death, the police began looking into the possibility of foul play.

Yoda was a hair stylist who worked at the beauty salon where Umeko had her hair done. He lived alone in an apartment about five hundred meters from the Hishikawa home. Since Umeko had no children, she was free to come and go as she pleased and did so to the point where she was something of a nuisance for Yoda. The police speculation was that the pair had somehow conspired to beat Hishikawa senseless and drive his car over the cliff. But when the police had a look at Yoda, they found him to be a frail and sickly individual, who had an alibi in that he had spent the night at the home of a friend. For her part, it turned out that Umeko didn't know

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how to drive. Once the facts were determined, the police began to wonder if it might have been a contract killing.

Eventually, they turned up one suspect. He was none other than Ose Yukichi, who ran a Mah-jongg parlor in the city. He had been a classmate of Yoda's in middle school and apparently Hishikawa had brought his wife Umeko to the Mah-jongg parlor on several occasions.

Physically, Ose was quite the opposite of Yoda, having trained as a boxer when he was young. It also turned out that a number of violent underworld characters regularly came to Ose's Mah-jongg parlor. Once he had joked with one of them about how easy it would be to commit a murder and make it look like an accident.

Umeko, Yoda, and Ose were all brought in for questioning. But no sooner had the police investigation begun than another startling development occurred. There was a propane-gas explosion in Yoda's apartment and both Yoda and Umeko were killed. Evidently the pair had been asleep when the gas leaked and an automatic pilot light in the bath had set off the explosion. It had the appearance of being an accident, but there was also the possibility that it had been a premeditated suicide.

In any case, because the two were dead, the insurance-company investigation was closed. With only Ose remaining in the matter, it was impossible to establish proof—and so the police investigation was also dropped.

"So the suspicion is that last August Ose may have committed a contract murder," Inspector Sugi said. "That makes it all the more likely that he followed the same pattern in this case. It seems we ought to be able to locate that woman and get a positive ID by having Ose hear her voice on the telephone—though we should consider the possibility that she disguised her voice when she called him."

"I wonder if we might not find a motive of hatred in the Hishikawa case, too," said a young police officer with some hesitation. "What I mean is that some relative of Hishikawa may have wanted to hurt Umeko, Yoda, and Ose, all three. But because Umeko and Yoda are both now dead, that leaves Ose as the sole target for revenge."

Inspector Sugi said, "In that case, wouldn't they attack Ose himself rather than get at him in this roundabout fashion?"

"Yes, that would certainly be more reasonable—and yet as things have turned out, it appears that someone may be having revenge on Ose. He's been arrested on the charge of murdering Akagi and

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there has been a revival of the investigation of the insurance-money murder in which he is also a suspect."

It was clear to Sugi that this line of reasoning made some sense. And suddenly, a new thought came to him. It was something that had been there from the beginning, but he had overlooked it. It was the drawing in colored pencil that had been sent by the so-called eyewitness. It had been drawn carefully and in great detail and was an accurate depiction of Ose Yukichi. Anyone who looked at it would identify it as Ose. It was on the basis of this clue that they were able to positively link Ose with his victim when there was otherwise no connection. But when you stopped to think about it, wasn't the portrait really too perfect? Even if the eyewitness had considerable artistic ability, the stairway of the apartment building and the street in front of it had been dark. And Ose must have passed under the streetlight very quickly. Yet the eyewitness claimed to have captured this detailed likeness through the curtained window of the snack bar.

Another point that needed to be carefully considered was that at the time the eyewitness had no reason to suppose that there had been anything special about Ose going into and leaving the apartment building. The murder itself was not discovered until that evening and it was even later than that before it was announced on the television news. So how and why did the eyewitness produce such a detailed likeness of Ose?

"It seems to me that the woman who got Ose to commit the murder may have wanted to make sure he was arrested and charged with the crime. In that case, she would have been familiar with the features of his face before she sat in the snack bar and observed him through the window. She made the sketch and sent it to the police to make sure that he was caught. She may not even have observed him from the snack bar at all."

"If that's the case, what would be Akagi's role in all this? If all the woman wanted to do was hang a murder rap on Ose, did she pick Akagi as a random victim?"

"We certainly can't rule out that possibility, but we probably ought to assume that she had a grudge against Akagi, too."

"We'll have to check out Akagi's past very thoroughly," the young officer said. "There's also that business about Hishikawa's death. To find out if there is some woman who might have paid ten million yen to have him murdered."

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"I think it would be risky to pursue only that one theory," cautioned Inspector Sugi.

The younger man nodded. "You mean we should continue to consider that some woman who was rejected as a lover by Akagi called Ose and seduced him into murdering him. That would be consistent with Ose's version of events."

In the case of the death of Teiichi Hishikawa, there was a suspicion that his wife and her lover had conspired to kill him. Further investigation revealed that he, too, had a young lover. She was Terumi Katsugi, a twenty-eight-year-old restaurant worker.

At the time of Hishikawa's death, she had provided testimony for the police investigation and expressed the belief that his death was murder, not an accident. Her testimony was still preserved in the files.

This woman still worked in the same place. The restaurant was located near Hishikawa's office—he had often dropped by there after work and after a time they had become lovers.

Early on the evening of April 4, two police officers involved in the investigation of Akagi's murder stopped at the restaurant to talk to her. They had called in advance and arranged to meet with her early, before any customers came into the place. The pair interviewed her in a small sitting room behind the dining room. She was a rather plain sort of woman, but she had an attractive, husky voice.

"Teiichi was a very serious sort of person, but he did not have much imagination. He wasn't getting along well with his wife. He knew she had a younger man for a lover. I guess she made things miserable for him at home, so it was only natural that he would start spending more and more time here."

As she recalled the past, tears filled Terumi's eyes and she had to stop for a few minutes to regain her composure. Then she went on to tell them that after the restaurant closed, they would go to a nearby hotel or to Terumi's apartment for their lovemaking.

"At the time of Teiichi's death, did the police tell you there was some suspicion that he might have been killed for the insurance money?"

"Yes. In fact, I called the police myself and offered testimony. Of course, they may have had other clues as well."

"What, exactly, did you tell the police at that time?"

"Before he died, Teiichi said he thought someone was trying to kill him. He was frightened. About a month before he died, he had

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a flat tire on a deserted road and when he got out to change it he was almost run over by a car that came up from behind. It was a brand new tire, so it seemed odd to him that he had a flat in the first place. On another occasion, when he was walking along the street, he was nearly run over. When I learned of his death, my first thought was that they had gotten him on the third try."

"Did you ask him if he thought it was anyone in particular who was trying to kill him?"

"No. Teiichi himself didn't have any idea who it might be. All he knew was that there had been two attempts to run him over—both made by the same car. He described it as a dirty tan compact. He said the driver was a man with short hair and square, angular features."

It was evidently this description that led the police to Ose. Until last August he had driven a tan compact, but had traded it in for a new car just before Hishikawa died. And of course he had short hair and square, angular features.

"In August, just before he died, Teiichi was involved in a traffic accident—do you know anything about that?" The policeman naturally assumed that she knew, but Terumi seemed surprised to hear it. "It happened at night at an intersection near his home. Another car rammed him, causing what could have been a serious injury although ultimately he suffered nothing more than a bruised leg. He finally agreed on an out-of-court settlement in which the other driver paid for Teiichi's medical expenses and a supplementary fee."

The accident had occurred at about eleven o'clock on a rainy night on a relatively narrow street. According to Hishikawa, his wife had talked him into going out to buy sake at a nearby dispensing machine. The other person was driving a white compact, which had skidded on the wet pavement and slammed Hishikawa's car into a stone wall. A taxi going in the opposite direction had witnessed the accident and quickly stopped, blocking the street. According to the taxi driver, Hishikawa got out and collapsed as he ran to him.

"If the taxi driver hadn't happened to be there," the policeman told Terumi, "the driver of the other car might not have stopped. He was a bar owner named Akagi Keiji, who was murdered in his apartment on the twenty-seventh of last month."

This information had been turned up as a result of the investigation into Akagi's past. The officers investigating the murder had read the police reports filed at the time of the accident and had talked to the officer who had investigated it. Confronting Terumi

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with this information had been a kind of test. The police wondered if there might be a connection that would emerge between the accident and the murder. There was a chance they could establish a motive as to why Terumi might want to get revenge on Akagi.

But when they told her about the accident, she merely shook her head in wonder. "He never said anything about the accident. Not to me. It must have happened when we were first getting to know each other. Still, that happened six months before he died, so he had six months in which to tell me, but he didn't."

This, at least, was what Terumi said. It didn't appear to the investigators that she was lying, but they also had no way to verify what she told them.

"Do you know anyone who might have killed Teiichi for the insurance money?"

"Do you mean a family member or something? He didn't have any children, you know, so at one point I suspected it might have been his wife."

"Do you know of any woman apart from yourself who was close to Teiichi, someone who is wealthy and has a seductive voice?" This question was asked by the junior police officer, who had remained silent up to this point. "Someone whose voice over the phone would be enough to persuade a man to do almost anything?"

"A seductive voice." Terumi bowed her head thoughtfully. "I don't recall him ever saying anything like that, but I suppose he could have been seeing another woman he didn't tell me about. I do know he was an only child and didn't have any sisters. His mother is still living. She lived with him and his wife for some years after they were married, but the women didn't get along, so they dumped her in a retirement home. I think he went to visit her occasionally."

"How old do you suppose his mother would be?"

"She must be about eighty by now. I felt very sorry for her when her only child died—it seemed so pathetic. I tried calling her once, but the attendant said she had grown senile and didn't know much of what is going on."

Two days after his arrest, Ose's case had been sent to the prosecutor and he had been held in prison. At 10:00 on the morning of April 6, Inspector Sugi and two officers took him inconspicuously from his cell.

The car containing the four men passed through the sun-drenched streets, then along a river lined with flowering cherry trees. Pres-

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ently it drew up in front of the shabby, two-story building that housed Ose's Mah-jongg parlor and his living quarters. The roof was still skewed where the wind had gotten at it. The shutters were open, but the windows were closed.

The Inspector unlocked the front door and they all entered the house, locking the door behind them. Inside were a number of Mah-jongg tables and, beyond, a small, tatami-matted room. Beside it was a cramped kitchen. On a shelf between the kitchen and tatami room stood a black telephone.

One of the police officers attached a recording device to the telephone and then the four men sat down and waited for it to ring.

"Didn't you say that when she phoned on March twenty-third the call came at about eleven-thirty?" asked Inspector Sugi.

"That's right."

"And the plan was that she would call you again ten days after you killed Akagi to arrange payment of the remaining five million yen?"

"She swore to it."

"Did you ask her what time she might call?"

"No. I didn't think that far ahead. At that point, I still wasn't taking it too seriously."

Ose stroked the telephone with his hand. He looked haggard and preoccupied. After a while, he whispered forlornly, "She really will call, won't she? Now that I've done it, I'm in a very weak position. When she paid me the first five million yen, I thought it didn't really matter who she was. But what will I do now if she simply takes off and never shows up?"

"She's already paid you five million—why shouldn't she pay you the rest?"

"I suppose she will. After all, she was willing to pay out five million yen before I'd done anything, so I suppose it's possible she'll follow through on her promise."

"That will make a pretty tidy sum along with what you got for that job last year." Certainly if Ose had killed Teiichi Hishikawa, he had been paid for the job.

"That's absolutely false. I had nothing to do with that."

He looked at the silent phone and shook his head regretfully. "From the very beginning, it didn't seem right that she should know so much about me while I knew nothing about her. The person who actually made the request to me was a woman, but who knows? She could have been a front for anyone or anything. So once I had taken

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her advance money, I had to go ahead with it. I had no way to give the money back and no way of knowing how she—or they—would get even with me if I just kept the money."

"But you think you still remember her voice clearly?" asked one of the junior officers.

"It is firmly stuck in my ears, I guarantee it."

"And you're sure that of all the voices you've heard so far, it wasn't one of them."

"I'm positive."

The previous day, they had called Terumi Katsugi from the police station and had Ose listen in, but he insisted that hers wasn't the voice. "Her voice wasn't husky like that."

Inspector Sugi turned his head to look out the window. The new spring growth on the trees was radiant in the bright sunlight. Naturally he had alerted the phone company to trace any calls coming to this number. He said, "On top of everything else, there is no way for her to know she is the object of an investigation of this magnitude. She must be supremely confident that her role in the murder is not known or even suspected. Whether she plans to pay you the rest of the money or not, she's sure to call you. That's the way the criminal mind works. It will be different, of course, if it turns out that you've just been making all this up."

"It's true, I tell you. Everything I've said is true. I had no grudge against Akagi and no reason to kill him aside from being in financial trouble and needing the money."

At that moment the telephone rang. The clock above the sink said 11:05. Ose looked at Inspector Sugi, who nodded. "String out the conversation. Keep her on the line as long as you can."

Ose seemed tentative as he reached for the phone. At the same time, both Sugi and one of the other officers reached for the earphones attached to the tape recorder.

"Hello, Mr. Ose—is that you?" From the earphones came the deliciously seductive woman's voice.

"Yes, it's me."

"Ose Yukichi?"

"That's right."

"I hope I haven't awakened you."

"No problem, I was already up."

"That's good. I was feeling impatient and couldn't wait any longer."

"I'm glad you called."

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"I wanted to thank you as soon as I could. I really appreciate what you did. It turned out just as I thought it would. I knew you were a real man."

"I'm glad you kept your word and called again."

"How did it go when you killed Akagi? I'll bet he put up a fierce struggle."

"No. It really didn't amount to much. I hit him hard right away."

"I understand you hit him with a wrench?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened?"

"Then? Well, I hit him twice with the wrench and he was unconscious. Then I strangled him."

"According to the newspaper, you used a nylon stocking. I suppose you planned that beforehand."

"Yes, of course. I bought the nylons at the supermarket."

"What about the wrench?"

"It was also new. I actually bought it some time ago, but I'd never used it."

"What did you do with those things afterward?"

"I wiped the fingerprints off and threw them into a ditch on my way home."

"That's good. Even if they are found, there's nothing to link them with you."

The woman pursued the conversation in her charming voice. "Thank goodness the police don't seem to have a clue about what happened. Have you heard anything from them?"

Ose's glance flickered briefly over to catch Inspector Sugi's eye. The inspector shook his head.

"So far I haven't heard a thing."

"Good. It's going to be all right. Everything will turn out just as I told you. You don't know who I am and there is nothing to link us. There is absolutely no reason for the police to suspect you. We'll both be all right."

"There is still the matter of the money you owe me," Ose reminded her.

"Of course. I promised I'd pay you."

"When?"

"Tomorrow, in the middle of the night. Actually, it will be the day after tomorrow—April eighth, at two in the morning."

"Where?"

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"We'll do it the same way as last time. I'll leave the money inside the ceramic duck on the playground at the day-care center."

"I suppose you mean to leave a note for me there and will actually put the money someplace else."

"No, this time that won't be necessary. But I must warn you that I won't go through with the payment if you lie in wait for me or make any sort of disturbance. From here on, there must never be anything to link us—for both our protection."

"Won't you at least tell me your name?"

The woman went on as though she hadn't heard the question. "It will be fifteen years before the statute of limitations expires. I'm sure we'll both live that long. Still, you must be sure to take care of your health. Who knows, maybe we will meet someday."

With that, the phone went dead. All four men in the room let out their breath simultaneously. Ose wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "You're right about her voice," said Inspector Sugi as he removed the earphones.

Once again, the phone rang. At Sugi's nod, Ose picked it up. "It's the operator," he said, handing the phone to one of the detectives. The officer spoke to the operator for a few minutes, his face darkening with disappointment.

"They weren't able to trace the call," he told them as he replaced the receiver. "If both the caller and the receiver are on the same exchange, the call can be traced in three or four minutes, but in this case the caller was using a different exchange. To trace such a call takes at least five minutes and this lasted only three minutes and forty-five seconds."

"It couldn't be helped," muttered the inspector. "Let's listen to the tape and hope we got it all clearly. Then we'll send it along to the forensic lab and have them do a voice analysis."

The day after tomorrow, at two in the morning when the playground was obscured by darkness, Ose would make his way to the ceramic statue. While he was preoccupied with finding the money, a woman would have the opportunity to slip up behind him and disable him. Is that what she planned? She believed that she had failed to get Ose arrested, so there was a real possibility that she might try to assault Ose herself. This would be her last chance.

"At least she called," said Sugi. "That makes it clear that your story is on the level. We'll go with you to the playground the day after tomorrow—and of course we'll have someone concealed there, waiting for her to make the drop . . ."

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Countless small puckers at the corners of her mouth formed themselves into a smile of unmistakable pleasure as Kine Hishikawa activated the tape recorder and listened to her exchange with Ose Yukichi. She felt confident that he would show up at the playground of the day-care center as promised. He really thought he was going to pick up the remaining five million yen.

What an idiot! Only a complete fool would think she would go through with the rest of it just because she said she would. But then, he was the sort of person who would kill someone just for the money. Kine stifled a giggle. Too bad for Ose Yukichi she was not such a nice person.

Just as she had urged him to, her son Teiichi had landed a good job at a fine insurance company. Through that company he had bought her a wonderful insurance policy. That had been twenty-three years ago. Fortunately for her, she had lived a long and healthy life. Three years ago, the policy had matured and she had received a lump-sum payment of five million yen. In addition, her husband had died eight years ago, leaving substantial savings, so that she now had assets worth more than ten million yen.

Two years ago she had spent three million to move into the retirement home. It wasn't the most luxurious sort of place, but she had a private six-mat room with a veranda and a good view.

One thing that was especially convenient about the place was the telephone system. She could make calls directly from her room without going through a switchboard or operator. She could also receive calls from the outside in the privacy of her own room. Teiichi had often called her and they'd had long conversations. And he was such a good son, he had come to visit her more than once every month. He'd enjoyed listening to all the things she talked about. And so, some time back when he said it seemed that the same car had twice tried to run over him and he wasn't sure whether to believe it was intentional, she had cautioned him to be very careful and alert. She had also warned him that it would probably be a good idea to give up his beloved sea-fishing for a while because it might be too dangerous.

Now when she thought about the car accident he had been involved in the previous year, she wondered if that, too, had really been accidental. After all, even Teiichi himself wasn't sure it had been an accident.

Kine choked back a sob and warm tears began to fall on the tape recorder in her hands. She quickly wiped them away and clung

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fiercely to the shabby old recorder as if it were a thing of great value. She had borrowed it from a retired policeman who was living in the retirement home, a gentleman with whom she was on friendly terms.

Back when he was still on active duty, he had often had occasion to attach this recorder to the telephones of people who were being harassed by crank callers. He had said it was very simple to use, and so she had asked him to connect it to the phone in her room. She had told him she wanted to record the voice of her grandson when he called, so that she could listen to it again later. He had been delighted to oblige her.

Following his instructions, she now extracted the cassette from the recorder. She intended to send the tape to the police with a letter, by a private delivery service—using the name of a rice dealer who lived some distance away. The rice dealer was a meddlesome old busybody, and it would serve her right to get in trouble with the police.

If Kine sent the cassette now, it would be delivered the next day. In the letter, she gave Ose Yukichi's name and address and explained that twelve days earlier she had called him and asked him to kill Akagi Keiji. She went on to say that she had just now telephoned Ose and that he had described the murder in detail and it was all down on the enclosed tape. The tape would provide incontrovertible proof that Ose had committed the murder. She also explained that they would be able to find Ose lurking around the playground of the day-care center at two in the morning the day after tomorrow.

"Of course, I wish I didn't have to do this," murmured Kine, talking to herself as usual. She *was* concerned that if she sent the tape, the police would subject it to a voice analysis and she might somehow be found out. After all, it had been for that very reason that she had sent the police the detailed sketch of Ose and the second letter describing his hurried departure from the scene of the crime. It bothered her that she had done all that work for the police and they still hadn't managed to finger Ose. Well, she'd do what had to be done, even if she put herself at risk. She had to make certain the police arrested Ose. "I have to make sure he gets his just punishment and that I'm responsible for it," she murmured.

Yoda and Umeko had died in the gas explosion—that had been their just punishment—but somehow the gods had not yet seen fit to make Ose pay for his errors. After all, there were people in the world who needed to be punished. But what could she do? He was

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a big strong man and she was a frail little woman almost eighty years old.

"My strength is my voice, and I can still use that." Kine was mincing about and talking to herself as though she were in the presence of a young lover. "My mother appreciated the finer things. From an early age, I studied dance and shamisen and singing. When I was married, I took up classical singing and continued with it until my husband passed away. Even when I was a child in elementary school, I joined the Children's Broadcast Theater. There I was often singled out for praise and always had the starring roles. And even now my voice has retained its timbre and resonance. It hasn't diminished at all over the years."

It was as part of her special education that Kine had learned to draw as well. She congratulated herself on how clever she had been in arranging the detailed sketch of Ose. She had rooted out a retired photographer who was living in the home and borrowed from him a camera with a powerful telephoto lens. One day when Ose emerged from his Mah-jongg parlor, she had photographed him from down the street and later made the sketch from the photograph.

"The people in this home have a wide variety of backgrounds and interests. I'm part of a group that sketch wild birds and flowers." She stopped pacing and frowned. "I wonder why the police weren't able to recognize Ose from my wonderful sketch? But then, they are incompetent. Two days after Akagi's murder, a pair of them came to see me and told me some things about Teiichi's death. Of course, they never supposed I would get even by asking Ose to kill Akagi."

Kine continued to talk to herself in a cheerful, youthful voice. "When they were here, of course, I spoke to them in a hoarse voice suitable to my age. Naturally I had rehearsed that. For nearly half a year I practiced so that when the police came they would think me just a silly old woman."

—translated by Robert B. Rohmer

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

According to the Introduction to Edward D. Hoch's *The Year's Best Mystery & Suspense Stories 1989* (Walker, $18.95), 34 mystery anthologies were published in 1988, only four less than the previous year's record total of 38. I don't know the numbers for 1989, but the bull market shows no signs of flagging.

Offering Hoch competition in the best-of-the-year business, Ed Gorman and Bob Randisi, founder-publishers of *Mystery Scene* magazine, have joined with Martin H. Greenberg to edit *Under the Gun: Mystery Scene Presents the Best Suspense and Mystery* (New American Library, $18.95 hardbound; $9.95 paperbound), the first volume gathering their choices for best of 1988, clearly a very good year for the mystery short story. Six of Hoch's twelve selections are among the 21 in Gorman/Randisi, including Bill Crenshaw's Edgar-winner, "Flicks," a powerful and original police procedural about the hunt for a movie-theater slasher, and strong stories by Gorman, Clark Howard (the *EQMM* Readers Award-winning "The Dakar Run"), Peter Lovesey, Sara Paretsky, and Bill Pronzini. Hoch and Loren D. Estleman appear in both collections with different stories.

Gorman and Randisi's other selections represent such major names as Antonia Fraser, Joseph Hansen, Robert Barnard, Simon Brett, Joe R. Lansdale, and Sue Grafton. They take a very liberal definition of suspense and mystery: Dean R. Koontz's "Twilight of the Dawn," a totally involving and thought-provoking account of an avowed atheist confronting personal tragedy and the pervasiveness of religion, involves no crime, is not a mystery in any conventional sense, and is a suspense story only in the way that any successful work of fiction is suspenseful. Still, I'd be the last to say they should not have included it.

Recent volumes in other continuing anthology series include the annual MWA entry, *Beastly Tales* (Wynwood, $17.95), edited by Sara Paretsky, and *Ellery Queen's Bad Scenes* (Walker, $21.95), edited by Eleanor Sullivan and gathering 25 stories from this magazine's near-half century.

Peter Lovesey's *The Black Cabinet* (Carroll and Graf, $17.95) brings together fourteen stories based on real-life crimes, beginning with Abraham Lincoln's "The Trailor Murder Mystery" (previously reprinted in *EQMM*, March 1952) and ending with the John Dickson Carr tale which gives the volume its title. Angela Carter's "The Fall River Axe Murders" is the most impressively written account of the Lizzie Borden case I've ever read. Some of the tales (by O. Henry, Aldous Huxley, Anthony

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Boucher, and Harlan Ellison) are anthology standards, while others, by writers like Osbert Sitwell, Lillian de la Torre, Miriam Allen DeFord, and Anthony Berkeley, are less familiar.

Less fresh and exciting but containing a lot of good (if mostly overfamiliar) reading is Elliott Roosevelt's *Perfect Crimes: My Favorite Mystery Stories* (St. Martin's, $17.95), regathering such well-anthologized chestnuts as Thomas Burke's "The Hands of Mr. Ottermole," Lord Dunsany's "Two Bottles of Relish," Harry Kemelman's "The Nine Mile Walk," and Roy Vickers' "The Rubber Trumpet," with others slightly less frequently collected and a couple unfamiliar. A much more ambitious historical anthology is David Willis McCullough's near-600-page *City Sleuths and Tough Guys* (Houghton Mifflin, $19.95), under which banner are gathered writers as varied in time and style as Vidocq, Poe, Hammett, Vickers (again "The Rubber Trumpet"), Simenon, Spillane, Ellin, McBain, Himes, Westlake, and van de Wetering. A particularly notable inclusion is the Raymond Chandler-Billy Wilder screenplay of *Double Indemnity*.

The books above rely on reprints. But happily more and more original anthologies are being published, usually with some unifying theme. Yuletide '89 will be long past by the time you read this, but for *next* Christmas you might want to lay in a copy of Charlotte MacLeod's *Mistletoe Mysteries* (Mysterious Press, $16.95), comprised of 15 new stories by an all-star cast of top mystery names. I especially enjoyed a surprising Christmas ghost story by Peter Lovesey, a fresh reverse on a standard holiday theme by John Lutz, and seasonal cases for series favorites like Bill Pronzini's Nameless (playing a reluctant Santa Claus), Edward D. Hoch's Simon Ark, Susan Dunlap's Jill Smith, and Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone.

Gay and lesbian mystery writers contribute to Michael Nava's *Finale* (Alyson, $8.95). Most likely to be familiar to general readers are Katherine V. Forrest, with an inverted case for L.A. cop Kate Delafield, and the very talented editor, whose lawyer sleuth Henry Rios makes a cameo appearance in "Street People." Peter Sellers (not, I hasten to say, the one who played Inspector Clouseau) has edited a second collection of 13 stories by Canadian mystery writers, *Cold Blood II* (Mosaic Press; U.S. distributor: Kampmann and Co., 226 W. 26th St., New York, NY 10001; $12.95), with contributions by Ted Wood (as himself and as Jack Barnao), Eric Wright, Charlotte MacLeod, Mel D. Ames, William Bankier, editor Sellers, and less familiar names. The feminist *Reader, I Murdered Him* (St. Martin's, $15.95), edited by Jan Green, has reprints by Margaret Yorke and Susan Dunlap, with originals by fourteen writers—mostly newer names but some as well known as Amanda Cross, Barbara Wilson, Sara Paretsky, and Sheila Radley. **** William Marshall: *The New York Detective,* Mysterious, $17.95.

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Marshall, a one-of-a-kind writer best known for his wild and farcical Hong Kong police procedurals, takes us to Manhattan in 1883, combining fascinating historical tidbits (see especially the visit to Edison's Electrical Generating Works), social commentary with a Dickensian feel, genuine plotting puzzlement, and Keystone Kops slapstick. Marshall shares a certain heightened energy and stylistic quirkiness with another (otherwise quite different) Mysterious Press author, James Ellroy.

*** Ralph McInerny: *Four on the Floor,* St. Martin's, $15.95. Father Roger Dowling, who stands with William X. Kienzle's Father Koesler and Andrew M. Greeley's Father Ryan as one of the big three currently active Catholic-priest detectives, stars in a quartet of cases in the sadly neglected novelet length. (Only the shortest of the four, "The Dutiful Son," has been previously published—in *AHMM.*) The people are likeable, the plots interesting, and (for this reader at least) this length suits Father Dowling better than the full novel.

*** Isabelle Holland: *A Fatal Advent,* Doubleday, $16.95. The Reverend Claire Aldington of St. Anselm's Episcopal Church in Manhattan is the most notable active Protestant-clergy detective with the passing of Charles Merrill Smith, creator of Reverend Randolph. Holland handles the tangled plot, the background of a large urban church and its choir school, and the large and varied cast well, but the prickly character of Claire—who, though sympathetic, could be very easy to dislike if met in real life—is her greatest achievement.

*** David Williams: *Holy Treasure,* St. Martin's, $15.95. Continuing the religious theme, banker-detective Mark Treasure and his actress wife Molly become involved with the affairs of a London church (St. Martin's—named after the author's American publisher?) threatened with redundancy. Williams is a reliable plotter, humorist, and social observer, and the comparison with the American Emma Lathen team remains apt.

***Richard Forrest: *Death on the Mississippi,* St. Martin's, $15.95. The latest in the always enjoyable series about Lyon and Bea Wentworth concerns a vanishing houseboat, a high-concept illusion in the tradition of Ellery Queen's "The Lamp of God" and Conan Doyle's "The Lost Special." The problem is solved midway, but the story has plenty of twists and turns still in store, plus a fine action finale.

** Ellen Hart: *Hallowed Murder,* Seal Press, 3131 Western Avenue, Suite 410, Seattle, WA 98121–1028; $8.95. Lesbian restaurateur Jane Lawless, a promising new sleuth, investigates a college-sorority murder in Minnesota's Twin Cities. There are some cliches and awkwardness in the character and plot development, but the background is well realized, and Hart offers some nice reader misdirection along the way.

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a *NEW* short story by

J. W. WHITEHEAD

"So, anyway, Charles—may I call you Charles?—why would you move from there to here? Company transfer?"

"A better offer," Charles told his new neighbor. It was what he always said, and in a way it was a precise answer. Even when he had to be obscure, Charles attempted to be precise.

The tenth story by J. W. Whitehead in EQMM since "A Quiet, Lonely Place" in the November 1987 issue marked his auspicious debut with us . . .

KEEPING IT UNDER CONTROL

by J. W. WHITEHEAD

The suburbs, and the living is easy. Early September.

Charles Zeiders is working in the garden, weeding, mulching—preparing for the inevitable change of the seasons. The yard is a mess, but he's whipping it into shape.

When Charles and his wife Cynthia moved in a month ago, he couldn't believe how the previous owners had let the grounds around the house go to seed. As with all the other times they'd shopped for a house, he had the vision and foresight to see the possibilities where others saw only problems. By this point in his life, forty-five and fit, working on his seventh house and garden, he feels as if there's nothing he can't tackle, no job worth doing that he can't lick. His life is a model of order.

In the garden, the dirt turns compliantly under his wise fingers. This will be the zinnia patch. He remembers the zinnia patch in Ohio, when they were living in Richfield in the late Seventies. That had been a nice place. A big old house that he and Cynthia and the kids—very young at the time, one and four—could sprawl around

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in when there was nothing better to do. A fine yard, already in good repair when they moved in, primed to flourish with a little know-how. The zinnias had blazed for what seemed like months. And they had good neighbors there, too. Dependable, but they kept to themselves when that was the right thing to do. Charles believed it was almost always the right thing to do. He didn't have the sort of personality that operated at peak efficiency when crowded. He liked things ordered, certainly, but with a certain spaciousness to the order. There had to be room for the occasional improvisation, the impulse that keeps you one step ahead, and keeps the living easy.

"Charles Zeiders?" says a voice behind him.

Charles turns too quickly, as if he's been standing in a darkened alleyway somewhere deep in the heart of the city and some disembodied voice has said his name. He looks up at where the man's head should be, but the sun is directly behind the man and all he sees is a large black shadow.

"Yes?" he says.

The man sticks out a dark hand. "Pleased to meet you. Francis Dred. We just moved in across the way." He gestures over his shoulder.

Charles stands and shifts over to where he can see the other man's face. Francis Dred is about ten years younger than Charles, and a smiler. His face crinkles naturally into a grin. Charles is faintly annoyed by the type, which are usually classified under some subhead like "winning personality." He identifies Dred's occupation as an earth-mover in sales—he also identifies him as something other than what he defines as a good neighbor.

"D-r-e-a-d?" he spells.

Francis Dred laughs. "That's what everybody asks. My wife almost kept her last name, even though she doesn't have that much investment in the whole women's thing. No, it's D-r-e-d. But don't call me that. Call me Francis—or Frank. My parents gave me a couple of doozies. Try explaining the name Francis to a bunch of ten-year-old boys. I used to get hooted right off the pavement."

Charles stares at the man. "How did you know my name?"

"Isn't that your name on the mailbox? Charles and Cynthia Zeiders? Am I saying that right? Is it *Zeed*ers or is it *Zide*ers?"

"*Zide*ers," says Charles. He looks down at the half turned flower bed. Francis looks with him.

"A green thumb, is that it? So that's your secret passion. A good

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one, a good one. You can blow off a lot of steam taking it out on the weeds and weevils. I do a little bit myself."

"A little what?"

"You're right, that sentence wasn't very clear. Yeah, I do a little blowing off steam, too, but what I meant is I do a little bit of gardening. Things don't look so bad here, though. You should see what they left me over at my place. Did you know the Christensons very well?"

Charles sees his chance to make a point. "I didn't know the Christensons at all. I don't know anyone around here very well. We just moved in a month ago."

"Well, you've got to come over and take a look at my garden, then. Maybe you'll have a suggestion or two. At the very least, you can take some encouragement back here with you when you see how easy your job's going to be compared to mine."

Charles realizes Francis wants him to cross the street with him right now. "I don't have the time just at the moment," he says weakly.

"Oh, did you think I meant right now?" says Francis. "I meant sometime. I meant any time. There's no rush."

Charles waits for the conversation to die.

"So where did you move from?" asks Francis.

"Stone Mountain. Georgia. It's right outside—"

"Atlanta. I know the place. Nice place. Beautiful, really. My wife and I passed through once on vacation, about five years ago. How about that—we could have looked you up if we'd known you."

Charles waits.

"So you were in Stone Mountain what, the rest of your life? You don't have an accent."

"I was in Stone Mountain for three years."

"Well, we wouldn't have been able to look you up, then."

Charles supposes this is just the nervous blather of a man trying to be friendly and receiving little response.

"So, anyway, Charles—may I call you Charles?—why would you move from there to here? Company transfer?"

"A better offer," Charles says. It's what he always says, and in a way it's a precise answer. Even when he must be obscure, Charles attempts to be precise.

"What do you do?"

"Corporate finance."

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"That's unbelievable. That's what they mean when they say serendipity. So am I."

"So are you what?" says Charles, not hiding his annoyance.

"There I go again. As you might imagine, English wasn't my strong suit in college. What I meant was, I'm in corporate finance, too. I know—you probably thought I was in sales, didn't you? That's what most people guess. But I just happen to have nerves of steel and a head for astronomical figures. Anyway, I start next week at MetroCorp. We'd been negotiating with them for a couple of months and the deal went through last week."

"MetroCorp?" says Charles. "*The* MetroCorp? With corporate offices in Bangkok, London, Manhattan, and on Market Street in Philadelphia?"

All along, Charles knew there was only one MetroCorp. All along, Francis Dred was nodding, his face crinkled into that annoying grin.

Charles Zeiders was a master embezzler.

By his own calculations—calculations that were made with the precision usually reserved for aerospace technology, calculations that allowed him to move freely from company to company in the superstructure of corporate finance—he had cleared over half a million dollars annually since he was twenty-nine. This was, of course, in addition to the sizable salary he commanded, which had topped six figures when he took the job in Atlanta.

The salary was fine for their present needs. MetroCorp offered a substantial increase if he would jump, and Charles, knowing with the instincts of the master investor as much as of the master embezzler that it was time to jump, took the offer and ran.

But the embezzled funds—they were for his retirement. He looked upon his secretive secondary career as a particular kind of investment, with a high risk and a very high yield.

There was no trick to making the money. In bed with Cynthia at night, both of them awake and thinking about the future, talking and planning and enjoying each other's company, Charles often scoffed at her awed notion that he was some kind of financial wizard.

"Any idiot could do what I'm doing given enough time and opportunity and the common sense to simply think about it," he'd tell her. "What I do isn't hard. You'd be surprised how slipshod most major corporations are about their finances. Either there's incompetence trickling down through the hierarchies of the structure or

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everybody's on the take. Either way is fine with me, as long as *I* stay awake. As long as I keep it under control.

"What's tough," he'd continue, "is the same in any financial enterprise: knowing when to get out. I'm investing my time and reputation—from what I hear about prison, my life—for the dividends I sock away. Naturally, the payoff has to be a little richer when the investment is so high. The key is to be vigilant. Watch the signs, don't let things get to you, and then know when to get out."

Several nights after first meeting Francis Dred, Charles is outside in the moonlight, collecting a garden hose extended to its full length across the side yard. As he coils the cold metallic snake around the steel hose-caddy, he chances to look up and see Francis across the street, near the back of his opened garage.

There is no light on in the garage, and the reflection of the moon is pale and hardly leaves a shadow. Charles watches out of the corner of his eye, still raveling the hose around the creaking wheel. Francis is no more than a different shade of grey in the deep greys of the garage. He appears to be standing in the dark, waiting.

In his childhood playing of Hide and Seek, Charles remembers, he thrived on the firm belief that if you stood still long enough in the shadows even if anyone saw you they would start to believe they didn't. You had to be motionless, you had to give up breathing for a little while, but then as soon as they turned away you could be off, quickly, silently. They might turn back, doubting their own eyes, they might even come up to the shadows and search them, but you would already be gone.

Charles imagines that's how it has been all his life.

Now he turns full face on Francis Dred's garage and stares at the shadows against the back wall, but sure enough, if there was something there, he doesn't see it now.

"Here's what I know," says Charles, turning out the light and working loose the neatly folded top sheet on the bed. Cynthia climbs in on her side, Charles on his. He folds his arms behind his head and talks to the ceiling. Cynthia lies on her side, her left arm over the pillow propping up her head. She listens quietly, absorbed. She has been waiting for him to open up about this.

"Francis Dred—if that's his name—shows up two weeks ago in the neighborhood and a week ago at work. My twenty-four-hour-a-day neighbor. At home, he's just across the street, at work he's three

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doors down the hall. He's even got a better view than I do. I know because he dragged me into his office to show me. And he had the temerity to complain about it. He said the sun shines in his eyes all afternoon.

"I see him on the train the first couple of mornings and he comes over and sits beside me and forces me to talk. Not about me, not about him, just about things. He seems compulsive about it, trying to understand me, get my views on things. Weird. Like he wants to know me, but he wants to be oblique about it. Like he doesn't want me to see what he's trying to do. Or like he knows that's what he's telegraphing to me in everything he does and so he's really camouflaging himself. I don't know. I can't tell.

"The other day he came up to me while I was out in the yard with the dog and he started talking to me about church. I don't mean about what church we go to or what church they go to, although that's how he eased his way into the conversation, saying they hadn't found a church yet and could I recommend the one we attend. I told him we didn't go all that often, but that St. Hilary's had always been all right with us. He asked me what they usually preached on, and I said it wasn't just one thing, that the minister was a fairly imaginative person and came up with fresh topics for his sermons at least as often as we went. He said but wasn't there one topic in particular that he talked about—one pet topic that he liked to come back to when all else failed or when he was feeling especially passionate about his vocation?

"Naturally I didn't know what he was getting at and told him so. He said it was like this. He said he and his wife had gone to this Episcopalian church in the last place they lived, which he said was just outside Cleveland—I didn't ask him where because I felt certain he'd tell me Richfield—and at this church the minister was on all the time about money and how temporal it is and how we were all caught up in some diabolical rat race to store up more and more of it against the day of our final rest. I know by now that there's some method to Dred's madness, and so even though he's blathering on I try to distill whatever motivation might be leading him to say what he's saying.

"He says that one night the minister came to visit them at their home. They had dinner together, and afterward they went into the den and had a brandy, which is what Dred says he does after every meal including breakfast. While they were sitting there, the minister asked Dred who he thought he was fooling, and Dred said he

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didn't know what that meant but there better have been a very good reason for the minister saying it. The minister said he had an excellent reason for saying it. 'We all lead secret lives,' he told Dred. 'But the difference between secrecy and hypocrisy is too fine a line for any man to walk.' Dred asked him to leave the house and he did, and Dred and his wife never went back to the church—and he began looking around for a new place to work. One of the places he contacted was MetroCorp.

"So Dred says to me, 'Of course, we all have secret lives. But is that anything to say to a person? Of course we're all hypocrites, but is that anything to tell a man who just gave you dinner and good brandy? What would you have done, Charles?' I told him I would have done the same thing and let it go at that. But he says, 'What do *you* think? Do *you* think we all lead secret lives?'

"I already knew what he thought. Am I going to argue with him about something like this? I say of course we have private lives, that's how we maintain our dignity. But he has that grin on his face, and he shakes his head and says, '*No—not* privacy, *secrecy*. Not something you'd *rather* not have people know, something you *can't* let people know.' Thank God that was when Randi ran out into the street after the Schmidts' collie and almost was hit. It diverted our attention and I was able to say good night and take Randi inside.

"Anyway, all this constant jabber of his, his endless, seemingly pointless probing is annoying. Francis Dred is, above all else, annoying. That's why I started driving in. Well, at work the next day, he asks if I got an earlier train. What good would it do if I started lying to him about little things like that? He traps me in a little lie, he may wonder about some bigger things. So I say no, the train was getting too tedious, hoping he'll take the hint. Naturally, he asks me how I got to work, knowing I must have driven. I say I drove. He asks if he can pay the gas and car pool with me, or I can pay the gas and he'll drive his car.

"I figure honesty has been my policy so far with him, so I tell him I'd rather be alone on the way to work, to get myself in the right frame of mind. Talk confuses my head, I tell him. A night with my dreams gets things all tangled—I need to get myself back in gear, under control, put some order in my head.

"He tells me he can respect that, but can he follow me to work the next day so he knows the best route into the city. What can I do? I've heard the question before, from otherwise very good neighbors who know when to leave you alone. Can I really say no to the guy?

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So I do it. Now I drive to work every day looking for Francis Dred. Sometimes I see him on the road, sometimes I don't. Sometimes he's already in the office when I arrive, other times he doesn't get there until later.

"At work I hardly ever see him unless he goes out of his way to stop by. But he's as busy as I am, and though we're in close proximity we're not working on the same projects. We're in the big meetings together, the ones that jam a whole room, but the small task-force meetings, he's not on the same things. Still, in every corridor, in every washroom, I find myself looking for him." Charles appeals to his wife. "What am I supposed to make of all this?"

Cynthia rolls over on her stomach and stares at the headboard, her chin resting on both fists. "Should you get out?"

"What do you mean—move?"

"Yes."

"No. If he's some kind of plant, watching me, that's the sign they need. They're looking for something as much as we are. I just have to stay one step ahead."

"Maybe he's not a plant. Maybe it's your imagination."

"If that's the case, then I suppose there's nothing to worry about, is there?"

Nothing changes.

By late November, Charles is badly spooked. He has begun to seek out Francis Dred's company as much as Dred did his, so that he can better keep an eye on him. Dred is open to this, if a bit more reserved now.

At the office, Charles goes about the day's business mechanically, not watching for the usual loopholes that open up nearly every day to drop money through. At his three-month review, he receives a tepid performance rating and a pep talk, the first of his life. Cynthia complains about how disinterested he's become in her, the kids, the house, the yard—in everything. He nods and vows to change, but doesn't.

Finally, while staring at the ceiling late one night and talking to Cynthia, he decides he will have to confront Dred and have it out. Some might suggest violence is the only answer, but Charles isn't a violent man, nor does he believe violence is the only answer. He wants to know where he stands. A dead man can't tell him that. There is only one approach Charles will consider with Francis Dred. Make him talk. Perhaps cut a deal.

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It will need to be sudden. He can't very well ask the man for a hearing. It will need to seem offhanded. Charles will begin looking for him outside the house, evenings at dusk.

He begins pottering in the yard again each evening. Cynthia takes it as a hopeful sign, though Charles comes back inside every night with his face nipped red by the cold and still as listless as before. He slowly, methodically prepares the garden for winter, taking extra care with it so that he will have an excuse to be outside as long as possible. Out of the corner of his eye he watches Dred's house. Sometimes he sees Dred come out the door, but always heading straight for the car. He will wave to Charles, but he doesn't stop for long, usually just for a few words exchanged at a shout across the street. He seems not to take the amount of interest in his own garden that he originally let on.

But then, in the first week of December, one mild night full of a fine mist, Dred comes out of the house, goes into the garage, and doesn't come back out. Charles puts down his trowel, sheds his gloves, slaps the loose dirt from his knees.

He crosses the street. There is no moonlight. The back of the garage is as dark as a crypt. "Francis?" he says, at the door.

"Is that you, Charles?" says Dred.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Go right ahead. I'll be with you in a minute. Why don't you come inside out of the rain?"

Charles steps inside and smells the good, musty smell of an American garage: old cardboard boxes, old oil, old rubber, old wooden and rusted-metal tools, old, old, old. It's amazing how the newest things can smell so old so quickly. Francis Dred and his family haven't even been in the house for three months. Charles feels old himself, and for a fleeting instant thinks, I can give it all up. Right here, right now, I can make it all go away. It is a real temptation and he fights it off with difficulty.

Dred's voice comes out of the shadows at the back of the garage. "Go ahead, Charles. I'm still going to be a minute or two here. Start talking."

Charles clears his throat and looks to see what he can see. He can swear he sees the shadow of Francis Dred's frame near the back wall, standing motionless. He listens, but he can't hear anything.

"Charles?"

"What?"

"You were saying?"

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"Oh, right. But what are you doing back there? Can you see?"

"Just tinkering, just tinkering." Charles can hear the grin in Dred's voice. "Give me one more moment."

"Francis, I know what you meant when you were talking to me about secret lives."

"You do."

"Yes. You've got one. I've got one."

"We all do," says Dred.

"But maybe not like ours."

"What kind do we have?"

Charles loses his patience. "Come on, Francis. Or whatever your name is. Get out here where I can see you."

Dred comes out. There is a gun in his hand. The grin is still there on his face. Whoever he is, the grin is an authentic part of the package. He says, "So what are you, anyway, Charles, a Fed or what? All these stories about different companies, different places, showing up to work where I work, to live where I live. Who tipped you off? I don't have a clue who it could be. I don't exactly drop breadcrumbs."

Charles looks at the gun.

Francis Dred says, "Come on, Charles. We'll say goodbye now. You're wrapped way too tight, you're a control freak, but I like you. Who did you think you were kidding with that uptight act? But no harm done. Admit it, I get under your skin, but I grow on you, don't I? I'm not so bad, am I? Listen, I'll start working the international circuit. I'll only vacation here. I'm really a sweetheart. I don't like violence any more than the next guy. But for my own reasons, let's call them professional reasons, I need to know. How long have you been following me?"

Charles stares at the gun. "I've never followed you."

They talk. Eventually they get into Dred's car and go have a beer. They throw a few rounds of darts. They agree never to see each other again. Charles even makes the extra concession of being the one to look for a new job. When they part, Francis leaves Charles off in front of his house.

Charles watches from his doorstep as Francis pulls the car around to his own garage. He can barely make out his form through the shadows. When he looks away, it's as if Francis was never there at all.

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Amanda's actual presence was too vivid, too immediate, to encourage reflection. Being with her obscured the past and devalued the future. She made the present supremely important . . .

THE CONVENTION

by TERRY MULLINS

Medical conventions are much like other conventions. The subject matter is different but the formal arrangements are similar. And if the convention is being held in your area, you probably will be drafted to serve on the planning committee.

That was how Howard Friel came to be the chairman of his. Since the other two members of the planning committee lived in different parts of the country, he did most of the advance work. Fortunately, he was used to it.

All was going well. The convention opened Monday afternoon with a business meeting. The presidential address took care of Monday night. On Tuesday morning he got up early for a swim, breakfast, and a check on the physical arrangements for the first real day of work.

For ten minutes he had the pool to himself. Then a young woman came in from the terrace, paused a moment as if she had expected to find the pool empty, then took off her robe and advanced to the edge. She ran both hands through her short blonde hair, dove in, and surfaced about ten feet from him. Shaking water from her eyes, she said, "We seem to be the only ones wanting to swim."

"Yes," he said, "it's seldom crowded before breakfast."

She was a good swimmer—not in his class, but better than most. They swam together for a while, with him pacing himself, then did a few dives, first from the low board, then from the high. She was beautiful standing on the edge of the board, her lightly tanned body firm and feminine.

It was half an hour before anyone else arrived. Then half a dozen members of the convention showed up in a group. Their appearance was Howard's signal to leave, have breakfast, and make sure every-

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thing was set for the day's meetings. She left the pool, too, and when he suggested they have breakfast together she accepted.

They ate on the terrace where swimsuits were permitted. "My name's Amanda Jones," she said.

"Howard Friel." He shook her hand with a grin. "I'm on the committee in charge of the convention."

"You're a doctor, then?"

"Yes, on the staff of a hospital here in the city. That's one reason I'm on the committee—I know the territory."

"But you are staying at the hotel?"

"I have to be generally available twenty-four hours a day in case anything goes wrong—which it usually doesn't."

She got up, threw her robe around her shoulders, and said, "Then perhaps we'll meet again."

The convention went smoothly. It produced the usual contradictory feelings of excitement and boredom, of breathtaking potential and small accomplishment. This was the third time the convention had met in Howard's city and he could predict most of the problems and provide most of the answers. It made him feel something of an outsider, however, sort of a benevolent parent watching the children's party.

On Tuesday night, the evening speaker concluded by nine and grateful members left the hotel for a night on the town. With the two other committee members, Howard checked the next day's schedule. They left it up to him to speak with the hotel management. By nine-thirty he was done. He walked to the lobby to see if any stray members needed help and found Amanda instead. She was just coming in, weary from a day of sightseeing.

"You look as if you could use a drink," he said.

"Is that an offer?"

"It is."

Over martinis, she told him she had visited the zoo, two museums, and an art gallery.

"It sounds exhausting."

"It was a bit, but I spent all day yesterday shopping and I had to catch up on my culture."

"No music?"

"Everything was sold out for the week."

"I can probably get tickets for the Mozart program tomorrow night

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if you're interested. I had thought about going but no one I asked wanted to include it in his schedule."

"That would be wonderful. When will you know for sure?"

"Tonight. I'll let you know at breakfast tomorrow."

It wasn't often that Howard made personal plans during a convention. He was popularly known in the association as the best knife man in North America. He usually appeared at any seminar that had anything to do with surgery. But being in charge of planning changed that. He had to be available to find a new meeting room if one of the seminars became too popular for the room assigned. He had to be ready to provide projectors and chalkboards for old timers as well as extra markers and newsprint for younger discussion leaders. He knew where things were and who on the hotel staff could deal with special requests.

But all of this was now routine. It left him with time to think and make personal plans. He found himself thinking of Amanda Jones and making plans that included her.

Wednesday morning they had the pool to themselves for almost an hour. At some point the subject of kissing under water came up and they spent five minutes experimenting before deciding it had its disadvantages and going back to swimming and diving. Over breakfast, they made arrangements for the evening—supper at a nightclub and then the Mozart concert.

Actually, Howard's periods of anticipation were brief. Either she was out of his thoughts completely or she was there in person, not in his imagination. And her actual presence was too vivid, too immediate, to encourage reflection. Being with her obscured the past and devalued the future. She made the present supremely important.

The one exception was during lunch that day. The convention recessed at noon and he was stuck with the task of escorting two guest speakers, their wives, and the convention chairman to a restaurant, where he had to arrange with the management for the convention to pick up the tab and to make sure they all knew how to get back to the hotel. As he stood waiting for the restaurant manager to check with the hotel, he saw Amanda having lunch with a young man. They were talking across the table with impervious intensity. The young man was absorbing everything she said as if his future depended on not missing a word.

When the manager assured him everything had been taken care of, Howard left the restaurant, feeling something suspiciously like

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jealousy or resentment or self-doubt. Amanda was young, somewhere around twenty. Howard was forty. Not a good combination. He dimly suspected it was probably a dangerous combination. Just how dangerous, he wasn't sure, but he had the uneasy feeling that comes to a man whose age has slipped up on him while he was concentrating on other things—the feeling that he isn't actually as young as he feels, after all. He felt vulnerable.

The discussion leader for the anesthesiology seminar that afternoon was called home by an emergency and Howard had to fill in. That effectively wiped all personal thoughts from his mind.

They came back in full force in the evening.

She was beautiful, wearing an evening gown that clung lovingly to every curve. She made dinner the most delightful he had ever known. Afterward they walked to the nightclub's penthouse garden. It wasn't large, a half dozen trees and assorted plants clustered in various places. It was shadowy and no one else was there. From the nightclub came the sound of the dance band. They tried dancing but found the music too erratic, so they just stood close together and kissed. "That really does beat kissing under water, doesn't it?" he said.

"It's much, much better," she agreed.

After that, the concert was if not anticlimactic at least irrelevant to him. He was much more aware of her presence beside him than he was of the music.

They applauded enthusiastically with the rest of the audience when the concert was over. It had been well done. She said she loved Mozart. She seized his hand and squeezed it—a spontaneous response which was somehow not like her usual studied warmth. He held her hand all the way down to the lobby, feeling foolish to be holding hands at his age but also proud of being willing to act foolishly and enjoy it. Back at the hotel, he invited her up to his room for a drink and she accepted.

She crossed the room and looked out the window, standing there framed by the dark sky and the lighted buildings. He poured their drinks and dimmed the lights so that the night glow of the city shone in. Leaving the drinks on the bar, he walked over to her. She turned and he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Then, behind him, the door opened. Howard heard nothing, but the room was dim and the hallway was brightly lighted and when

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the door opened it was like turning on a searchlight. He spun around. The young man who had been talking with Amanda at lunch was in the doorway with a pistol in his hands. He fired at the place where Howard had been and the bullet struck Amanda instead. She gasped and fell. Howard grabbed a bronze bookend from a shelf beside him and threw it at the young man. It struck him in the throat and he fell, hitting his head on a chair. He lay still.

Howard called his hospital for an ambulance, then called the police.

The police arrived first and a Lieutenant Gorcy took charge. By then the young man was coming around.

Howard's attention remained with Amanda. She had been shot in the chest. He went with her in the ambulance and rushed her to surgery. While he was scrubbing, they showed him her X-rays. The bullet had lodged above the heart. A fraction of an inch either way would have severed an artery and killed her at once. Removing the bullet might do the same, but the bullet had to be removed.

He operated, assisted by his usual team. He was intense and competent—the best man with a knife in North America. His scrub nurse congratulated him on a perfect job.

He returned to his hotel room to await word from Lieutenant Gorcy. The officer on duty in his room had heard nothing from the lieutenant. He sent word that Howard had returned and told Howard the chief would be right over.

The bookend lay where it had landed. Three travel guides it had supported had spilled onto the shelf. The grey carpet near the window was stained with blood. The drinks were on the bar, untouched.

Well, he had done his best. She would live.

He walked to the window. So much had changed. A few hours ago, traffic had clogged the streets and made a pattern of life through the city. Now two or three cars drove quickly through emptiness. Then the skyline had made a bright panorama of excitement against the dark sky. Now buildings and sky were almost indistinguishable. He felt terribly alone.

Gorcy arrived with two officers and they all sat down. "Perhaps you can give us a full account now, Doctor Friel," he said.

Howard took a deep breath. "We were standing by the window. My back was to the door. She turned to me and the door opened. I spun around and the man in the doorway fired a shot, hitting her.

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I threw that bookend at him and he fell, hitting his head on the chair. Then I called you and the hospital. Is the man all right?"

"Yes. We got him to a hospital closer by. He has a concussion, but he'll be okay. His story confirms yours. Why do you think he came here with the gun?"

Here was the statement Howard had dreaded making. "I think he and the girl set me up—though why, I don't know. I have only about a thousand dollars with me and most of it is in the safe downstairs. If he hadn't shot her, I'd suspect blackmail, poorly timed."

"It wasn't blackmail. She had stuck plastic over the doorlatch so he could get in. He was supposed to tie you up, take what money and valuables he could find, and kidnap the girl. The idea was that you'd pay a big ransom to get her back. But he was nervous, and when you turned he fired the gun. Coming in from the bright hallway, he couldn't see well and he hit her. He'd be facing a murder charge if you hadn't saved her life."

"You have his confession in writing?"

Gorcy nodded. "The case against him is letter perfect."

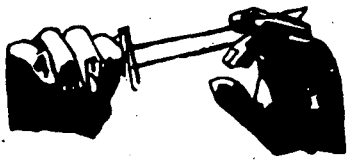
"What about her?"

"That's pretty much up to you. If she claims he acted out of jealousy, his confession wouldn't mean much. After all, he did shoot her. If you can give us something more, we could charge her. Otherwise, probably not."

"I can't. And I'd hate to think I saved her life just to send her to jail."

"Then I guess she's your patient, not my prisoner."

When the police left, Howard let his mind drift to the operation—the job he had done as a matter of necessity. He was glad it had gone as well as it had. He usually checked in on his patients regularly as they recovered. He didn't plan to do that this time.



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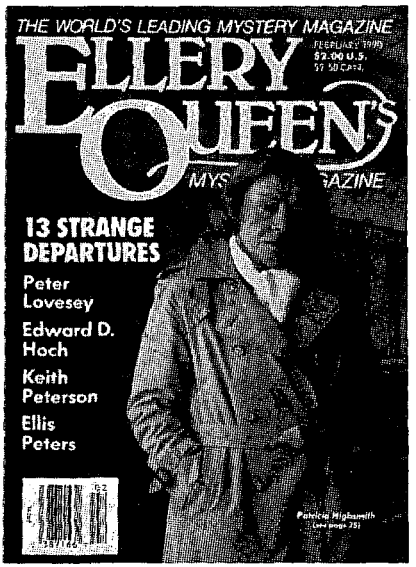

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Returning home to the ranch had never been easy for Roger, but now, a month after his father's death, it was downright difficult . . .

DELIBERATE MEN

by LEA CASH-DOMINGO

The gas gauge read a quarter full. There wasn't enough gas to make the trip to my father's cattle ranch, which was nearly an hour away. I got out the map, studied it, and looked below, where the craggy red earth stretched into a jumbled horizon of muted greens and pale browns. No landmark, nothing but flat bedrock and what looked to be loose gravel slopes. I was off course.

I searched the landscape for something familiar, but all I could see were mesas and sidecanyons with their sinuous ledges. What usually seemed fascinating was now terrifying—I could die out here and no one would hear or see a plane going down. The gas-gauge needle dropped dangerously close to the empty mark. Cut your losses, my father's voice intruded in my memory.

Fine, I retorted as if he were in the cockpit with me, but where do I land? And if I land, how do I get airborne again? Blood began pounding in my ears. Keep calm, I told myself as I dropped elevation and coasted a hundred or so feet above a sand-crusted plateau.

Heat clamped. And as I cruised over a terrace of flat grey rock and sparse, dowdy, knee-high bushes, all at once horses flew to meet me. They seemed frenzied, their heads thrown back, their hoofs clawing one another, backs arched. For what seemed like minutes, I stared bewildered, unable to think. Then I snapped to, pulled back on the throttle, and cut my speed.

There had to be dozens, perhaps sixty in all. As I hovered overhead, I saw they were confined in a sand pit of sorts. It was about thirty feet wide and a hundred feet long, but the sides only came up four feet or so. The horses should be able to climb out, I thought, judging from what I could make out of the angle of the sides of the pit. How had they all wound up in there? The horse is no stupid creature, and

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surely, seeing several stumble and fall in, the others would have skirted it. I hung above at a hundred feet, looking down, asking myself why.

Behind me, the sun dropped out of sight. Red and orange color fanned the sky. Get the hell out of there, my father's voice intruded again as the red warning light came on. "To *where?*" I cried out aloud. And then I saw it ahead, at the tip of the horizon: an airstrip. I switched to an air channel and radioed my descent to ground control. As the gauge dropped to empty, my wheels touched the ground.

I climbed out, unzipped my jumpsuit, and gazed around at the nearby mountain range. I was in Bondurant—not, after all, off course. And just beyond the hangar, my ride home would be waiting.

As I gave instructions to the airstrip attendant, I tried to figure what I'd need on my return to the range to set the animals free. I couldn't very well go into a pit of terrified horses myself—I'd be trampled to death. Perhaps if I were to try a rope— But I was useless with one.

And it was dark now. Any idea of loading up a jeep and coming back out here would have to wait. My mother would be hurt if I left as soon as I arrived.

Len Bishop was waiting for me, chewing a toothpick and nursing a can of beer. A fellow rancher and cowboy, he had been a friend of my father and, perhaps because he was my age, thirty-five, he had taken the place I never had as favored son. Together he and my father had swallowed smoke and dust in the branding corral and ridden the cattle out to pasture.

Returning home had never been easy, but now, a month after my father's death, it was downright difficult. I had always felt like an outsider. Even though I was my father's only son, I'd long ago proven a disappointment to him. For one thing, I didn't—couldn't—eat beef since I was old enough to understand where it came from. "Not too many vegetarians out here," my father would say with a chuckle. "Livestock is what put the clothes on your back." He had been a sun-up to sun-down rancher, a deliberate man. I was the one who insisted on making backyard pets of the cows.

Len looked the same. Marks of wind and sun showed on his squint lines and taut burnished skin, making him seem a good ten years older. "Say, Roger, long time no see," he said. He smelled permanently of the barn.

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"How's it going, Len?"

"Could be better." He drained the can of beer and crunched it in his fist, then got into his jeep and started up the engine.

I got inside. "How's life on the range?" I asked.

"Same as always," he replied easily. "The elements are what we're always up against—cold, ice, and snow. Or dry and dusty and no rain."

I gazed out at the darkness, but saw only my reflection in the window: a boyish face with smooth skin and curious blue eyes.

"We got overextended this year with the bank because feed costs went up," Len said amiably as he drove onto the main stretch of highway and headed in the direction opposite from town. "But I expect Gandy Thomas will tell you about that himself."

"Gandy?" Gandy Thomas was another rancher whose property bordered the range. "Why Gandy?"

"Well, he's been helping your mother out. Squaring things away—money, accounts, that sort of thing."

I remembered how attentive Gandy had always been to my mother, and knew he'd been her first love before my dad came along. "Couldn't you help her?"

"Ledgers aren't my thing. You know me, Roger, I get nervous if I'm not outdoors with a rope in my hand."

"I saw horses out on the range," I said.

"Where else would they be?"

"They're trapped for some reason."

"Trapped? Behind some boulders?"

I shook my head. "They're in some kind of pit. There's sixty of them, maybe more."

"I don't know, Rog. I've never known horses to wander into a place they can't get out of."

He spoke with authority, reminding me of a time in my twenties when I envied him—envied the way he roped a calf, his gentleness with horses, his popularity with cowboys, the way my father respected him. "You got to be slow an' deliberate with them, that's the way to rope horses," he'd say. "That way ya won't rile them up."

Len turned onto the access road that led to my father's cattle ranch. Ahead half a mile or so, I could see the farmhouse lit up and the habitual uneasiness took over as Len tracked the familiar crevices and bumps to the square emerald lawn and house.

My mother came out to meet me. She wore her usual bluejeans

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and cotton shirt, but had added a silver choker with a large turquoise stone at the throat. We hugged.

"You look wonderful, Roger," she said and acknowledged Len with a nod. Len excused himself and took off.

"You do look terrific," she said. "But you're a little pale."

I laughed. "You'd look pale, too, if you worked inside four walls without so much as a window."

"Why computers?" she asked, as she always did, with incomprehension. "Don't you ever want to come home?"

"Mom, no pressure, okay?" She caught my eye and looked away. "I hear Gandy's been picking up the pieces."

"He's been a big help."

We walked inside the house.

Seated in my father's study just off the foyer, Gandy, broad-shouldered and well muscled, sat in front of the fireplace in an easy chair made of rawhide, smoking a cigar, reviewing lists of supplies. "Roger."

"Gandy."

"Pull up a chair, Rog."

I did—and eyed him, wondering whether he was hoping after all these years to work his way back into my mother's affections. "Len tells me it was a hard winter."

He shrugged. "It isn't a new situation, Rog. One year the cattle prices fall, the next year we have to buy new equipment. Last year we had foragers."

I nodded. "Same old stuff, eh?"

"The fact is, the crowning blow was this huge mass of Siberian air that chilled us for over a month. We had to bring in lots of feed. It was hard on your dad in his condition. He really shouldn't have been out working."

My father's condition was arthritis, which struck suddenly, nearly crippling him.

"The pneumonia wiped him out," Gandy added, staring at the lists.

"I know," I replied, feeling the need to talk. "Mom said it was quick."

"It was."

I did not, could not, attend the funeral. For all our differences of opinion, I loved him and couldn't bring myself to face the fact I had lost him without ever really having known him.

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"Your mother'll tell you, your dad went out one morning to look for the cattle and the weather was so bad he was wishing he wouldn't find 'em."

I smiled at the thought that my father could be ambivalent. "Does my mother need a loan?"

He shook his head. "The ranch will pull through, don't you worry. Len's a very capable cowboy, and, well, you know your mother. As soon as I teach her what she doesn't know, she'll be running the show."

It was strange to think of my mother, who had been my one ally, stepping so completely into my father's shoes. But, yes, she was capable, she could ride a bucking horse without falling off, and she wasn't afraid of shoeing a horse or branding a cow.

"How was your flight?" he asked.

"I saw a strange sight. Sixty or so horses on the range, trapped in a sand pit."

"Sometimes the things wild animals do defy all reason."

"I thought I'd go out tomorrow morning and try to help them out."

"Don't set your hopes too high. If the horses themselves haven't found a way out, they probably aren't coming out."

In the morning, just as the sky was turning from a dusky pink to an orange-yellow glow, I loaded up my father's jeep with water, a rifle, a few ropes, fruit and sandwiches, and took off. The road had that eerie look that it has at five-thirty in the morning on a spring day. The flat stretch of land was a crust of bread and the sky was a block of blue.

I came to the road-end and a canyon. The pass through it seemed a dark irregular shadow. The sun disappeared over the ridge as I entered the darkness. Two forbidding canyon walls rose on either side. There was no one, nothing, to account for my passage. I mounted alongside a dry riverbed and climbed layers of strata.

When the clock on the dashboard read seven o'clock, the canyon walls fell away, as they do when I push the throttle into my gut and veer skyward. For an instant the dark, irregular shadow fell away, too, and I had the momentary sensation of flying.

It was only the angle at which bright daylight flooded into the shaft that made me feel suspended. Then the light resurrected itself and the ground stretched out again before me—but now into a sand-hardened blanket interspersed with tenacious dry yellow shrubs.

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The ridge flanked my rear—ahead was level sandy plain as far as the eye could see.

The day was warm and the air dusty. The block of blue sky weighed oppressively over the land. The paved road ended and beyond it were tire marks. I followed them, the jeep swaying as the wheels slowly negotiated clumps of dried shrubs and pits in the earth. Then, all at once, the sandy plain sloped downward. I could hear hoofs and neighs. I turned off the engine and got out. The air stank of something sour, and I covered my nose and breathed through my mouth until I thought I could adjust to the smell.

I didn't become aware of the swarm at first, perhaps because the humming was everywhere. At length I realized there was a mist of flies. I swatted at them and they moved densely, like a shimmering metal curtain.

I moved around the pit. The horses were clearly terrified. Wide brown eyes peered wildly at me. A few, I saw, had been trampled to death. I ran back to the truck for the ropes. If there was a way out for these horses, I'd see to it.

Gunshots rang out. My head jerked toward the canyon walls. The sound of another shot ricocheted in the canyon. I stared at the horses, at the ropes in my hands. Close by, tires screeched. I got into the jeep, started up the engine, and tore across the range, the horses and their cries a peripheral horror. In my rearview mirror I saw another jeep burst forth from the canyon walls.

The ground was fraught with gullies and ravines and large pockets of sand. It was foolhardy to think I could escape by heading away from the canyon—eventually I'd run out of gas and become a cornered animal. I turned the jeep around, waited until the pursuing vehicle, a white four-wheeler, was well within view, and then floored the gas pedal.

The tires churned in the soft earth, but the jeep didn't move forward. I tried again. The tires ground into dirt and sand. The white jeep approached. I tried a third time and this time my father's jeep bolted forward and tore across the ground, whipping past the white jeep.

I entered the canyon. The walls overhead loomed. I took the passage at fifty miles an hour. In the rearview mirror I could see the other jeep closing in behind me. Sweat broke out on my neck and back. Depending on the mercy of the driver, if he caught up with me, I might be spared, or shot. I sped out of the canyon at seventy miles an hour.

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The white jeep slowed, turned right, and headed toward the Cullen property. I slowed to watch it, my hands shaking on the wheel. When my heart slowed, I turned left and headed toward town to pick up a few bales of hay and some oats.

Len stood outside on the stairs. "I hear you went out to the range."

"This morning." I nodded, angry now that the fear had worn off. "Know anyone with a white jeep?"

"Sure, lots of guys." He accompanied me inside the house. "Gandy does. Why? What makes you ask?"

"Someone came after me in one, shooting."

My mother was in the dining room. "What's that?" she asked.

"Someone tried to shoot me out on the range," I said.

"What? Are you all right?"

I nodded. "I thought it might have been one of Cullen's men."

"Mark Cullen?" Len asked, as if he didn't believe it. "What made you think so?"

"Because the jeep that was following me headed out that way."

"I don't think Mark or his boys have that kind of time," Len said. "They're a hard-working bunch, same as the rest of us. Of course, you could always go out there and ask."

"And get shot."

"I'll come with you."

We drove out to Mark Cullen's ranch and found him in the branding corral. Cullen was a small, slender man with a burnished complexion. After he'd extended his condolences and asked how I was doing in Denver, I told him about my encounter out on the range. He said he'd been in the branding corral since sunrise, along with every available hand.

I waited until the house was asleep before I went out to the range again. The stretch of road leading from my father's property to the canyon entrance was as dark as the sky, except for the jagged rainbow halo around the moon. Driving along the canyon floor was like taking a flight into No Man's Land. Slabs of rock jutted out, threatening to seal my passage.

Moonlight casts a different shadow than the sunlight. Silver light sifted through the night, bathing a petrified tree here, an intrusion of granite there, following the jeep like an alien tracking a species. As the jeep moved forward into the winged night, each object suddenly became shadow and just as suddenly joined the darkness be-

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hind me. In the rearview mirror, the night asserted itself like a thick barrier.

When at last I was out of the gorge, the moonlight hammered down. Spread before me was a tumultuous sea: the horses appeared like rolling mounds, still caught in their frenzy. I parked the truck, put on a heavy woolen jacket, and armed myself with a flashlight, several ropes, a shovel, sacks of wild oats, and the hay.

I walked to the other side of the pit, trying to decide on the best exit. Then I saw a wire fence marked along the jagged top with a strip of red cloth and held in place by slender metal posts, the kind I'd seen often enough on the ranches of the three men whose properties converged on the entrance to the canyon—my father's and those of Gandy Thomas and Mark Cullen.

I felt sick. Both Gandy and Mark and most of their ranch hands were capable of rounding up horses and leading them into the canyon. But why? Was it that the horses were eating the grazing grass meant for the cattle? But surely Gandy wouldn't corral them into a pit and leave them to die.

It took half the night to remove the wire fence. The rest was easy—digging steps into the sides of the pit that the horses could use as footholds to climb out. As I worked, their frenzy died down a little and they watched. Finally, when I was done, I slit open the hay and sacks of oats on the high ground and retreated to the jeep.

The sea rose in unison and ascended from the pit. The horses raised their necks to the moon and thundered across the mesa in a dust bath. Only one horse remained in the pit, poised and tense, curious. I sensed its nervousness—or was it my own? Then gracefully, easily, it stepped upward and then galloped after the others, its dark shape merging with the shadows.

Then I heard firing shots, followed by the sound of hoofbeats from behind. I turned around too late, and was knocked down. Hoofs pounded down, barely missing my face. Instinctively I reached for the cinch that held the saddle in place. The rider careened one way, then the other, dragging me over dried shrubs with thorns and small jagged rocks.

I tried to hoist myself up to keep my head safe from the pounding hoofs and at the same time loosen the strap. The rider turned the horse around, cantered for several yards, and then increased speed so that my body became almost lightweight, flying just inches above the ground. If I couldn't loosen the saddle and unbalance the rider, I'd be dead, for I sensed the rider had charted a path back to the pit.

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I groped around the horse's belly, wedged my hand between the animal's hide and the strap, and tugged. Seconds counted, and it was taking too long! The cinch still held. I freed my hand and, my legs knocking the ground, reached for the rider's knee and pulled.

The horse swung around and reared. I let go of the rider's leg as the horse lost its balance and fell sideways, then let go of the cinch with my other hand, dropped to the ground, and covered my head. The horse fell into the pit, taking the rider with him.

There was a scrambling sound. I raised my head in time to see the horse hoist itself upright. The rider, whose left ankle was caught in the stirrup, struggled to get free. As he did, the horse rose from the pit, its right front hoof coming down hard on the rider's shoulder. I stared in disbelief as the rider fell back with a howl of pain and I saw his face—Gandy Thomas!

"Roger!" The voice, from the other side of the pit, was Len's.

I froze, my attention still fixed on Gandy and then by degrees, with relief, to where Len stood at the brink of the pit, his rifle pointed down at where Gandy writhed in pain. No, I thought. "Don't!" I called to Len.

"He'll just chase them into the pit again."

"No—put your gun down, Len. Let's go and get help for the man."

In the pit, Gandy tried to sit up, but was unable to do more than raise his head.

"You know," Len said, as we drove to the ranch in my father's jeep, "Gandy could've killed you out there tonight."

I looked across at him in the passenger seat, the rifle safely put away in back, glad that my father was dead, that he couldn't witness Gandy's pain or my disappointment.

"If you had killed Gandy, I would never have guessed," I said.

"What are you talking about? The man went crazy. Twice he went after you with a gun."

"No, he didn't. You did. You fired the shot that made his horse run wild."

"And I suppose galloping at top speed was his idea of kindness? I saw the entire thing. I wasn't on that horse—he was."

"I suppose by going faster, he thought I'd be injured less," I said. "You rode the horses into the pit and left them to die—you're the only one who has that much skill, Gandy isn't the expert you are with a rope."

Len glanced toward the back of the jeep, then at my face. Guilt

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showed as a sickness in his eyes. "It was strictly business. Those horses were devouring our feed. You may find the idea of a few horses being left to die unsettling, but it's not the end of the world, believe me. Your father would've understood."

"My father would've rounded them up, herded them onto a long truck, and drove them out to a place with a river and grass."

"You're a dreamer."

"I always have been," I said, and as the ranch came into view in the dawn light, I saw that in his strange way my father had been as well.

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

Back on her bench, Alma turned first to the daily horoscope: "Early disappointment might be a blessing in disguise. Evening brings a change of plans." Oh, of course, she scoffed, and I'll find a diamond ring under this bench . . .

INCIDENT IN TERMITE PARK

by DONALD OLSON

By the end of that month, Alma felt smothered under the weight of her daughter's good intentions. They meant well, bless their hearts, but *living* with them? No, thanks. It was like being confined in a plush house of detention. And how tiresome they could be! Her son-in-law Roy with his politely reproachful smiles and Megan with her Needless Reminders: "Don't forget to turn off the oven, Mother." "Remember to lock the door, Mother." One would think she were nearer ninety than sixty-five. And today, being Friday: "You won't forget your appointment, will you, Mother. Taxi money's on the desk."

On Fridays, Alma discarded her everyday wig in favor of one more daring—flame-red in hue and excessively curly. So what if it made her an object of curiosity, as Megan insisted? Appointment Day demanded bright colors to lift the spirits and a more liberal dash of Megan's most expensive scent.

Although rain threatened, Alma decided to spend her taxi fare on a movie and then walk the ten blocks to her appointment. Megan would never know.

Leaving the theater with still an hour to kill before her appointment, Alma bought another box of popcorn and tripped across the street into the park, such as it was: a few weary-looking chestnut

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trees, half a dozen benches, and a play area formed from various sized blocks of wood where kids could clamber about and tumble into a pit of sawdust without breaking their little necks.

Alma chose a bench and began feeding the pigeons, finding them more fun to watch than the raucous children and their doting mamas. Beyond the playground, a scruffy blond young man in a raincoat slouched on a bench reading a paperback. A bag lady foraged through the trash bins and wandered away, muttering. Time dragged as the sky darkened. Boredom settled upon Alma like those swollen, watery clouds above the trees.

She thought wistfully of her own little flat on the other side of the city. She missed her sense of freedom, the presence of familiar faces. She missed her morning paper. This last thought crossed her mind as she observed a well dressed man carrying a briefcase toss his folded newspaper into a trash bin at the far end of the park. Instantly, she jumped up and hurried to retrieve it. Anything to pass the time.

Back on her bench, she turned first to the daily horoscope: "Early disappointment might be a blessing in disguise. Evening brings a change of plans." Oh, of course—and I'll find a diamond ring under this bench, Alma scoffed. She fished a pen from her carry-all and turned to the crossword, uttering a little moan of betrayal as she discovered it was already completed.

Until the man spoke, she wasn't aware anyone had sat down on the adjoining bench.

"Rain on the way?"

Alma, brightening, summed him up with a glance: Retired. Widower. Ample pension, judging by the camel's-hair topcoat and expensive shoes. Lonely, too, probably, but not one to let himself go, which Alma admired. So often men on their own went quickly to seed.

They exchanged the obligatory remarks about the weather and then, in reply to the stranger's query, Alma said no, she didn't live in the neighborhood, she was merely spending some time with her daughter and son-in-law. "I've gone through a little bad spell. My daughter, bless her for an angel, doesn't want to leave me on my own quite yet. But I do miss my freedom. You live alone, do you?"

"We all come to it, don't we?"

"If we're lucky," said Alma, at which the stranger smiled uncertainly, suspecting a joke. They both looked away toward the playground.

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"The police call this place Termite Park," he reflected.

Alma laughed. "Because of those wooden things and the sawdust, I suppose."

"Partly, and because at night it's a hangout for undesirables."

"How considerate of them."

"Beg pardon?"

"To confine their activities to the evening hours."

"It's a serious problem," he said reprovingly.

"I wonder, is there such a thing as an unserious problem?"

Alma was enjoying the chat. Mr. Luxford, as he had introduced himself, was obviously a gentleman—and a gentleman of means at that. And could she help it if she had a cheerful, outgoing nature? She knew what Megan would say: "Don't be too friendly with strangers, Mother. You know what might happen." Well, so what? Life wasn't worth living without a little fun, a little excitement.

But now the rain began to fall. Alma hastily spread the newspaper and held it over her head as she rose. Mr. Luxford immediately pulled it from her hands, folded it, and tucked it under his arm. "No need for that, you can share my umbrella."

"I'm afraid I've an appointment several blocks away, and I spent my taxi money on a movie."

"No problem," he replied with a gallant-old-soldier smile.

As they walked, Alma linked her arm in his and leaned against him, sheltering under the big black umbrella. The last traces of boredom vanished as she pressed cozily against Luxford's protective bulk, her fingers stroking his coat. "I adore camel's hair," she murmured. At that moment, she noticed the blond young man who had been reading in the park turn up his collar and dash across the street, ignoring the traffic signal.

Her companion gave her arm a discreet squeeze. "I say, why don't we pop in somewhere for a spot of tea?"

"Or a glass of wine? It sounds heavenly, but I can't be late for my appointment." Alma was truly sorry she had to refuse, but it was now too late to change her mind.

Midway along the block, a curious thing happened. Luxford suddenly stopped short as two men, approaching shoulder to shoulder, seemed about to barge straight into them. Grabbing Alma's arm, he spun around and started walking in the opposite direction—only to stop again as they came face to face with the young man in the raincoat, who held up a warning hand.

"Don't be dumb, Luxford."

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Alma and Luxford were now hemmed in by the three men, when something even more extraordinary happened. Luxford made a swift but clumsy attempt to slide the newspaper into Alma's carry-all. The blond man snatched it from his hand. "We'll take that, if you don't mind."

A dark sedan pulled up to the curb. Flashing a badge, one of the men grasped Alma by the elbow. "In the car, please. Both of you."

Luxford started to protest. "Gentlemen, I assure you this lady has nothing to do with me."

The young man laughed. "Don't con us, Luxford. I saw her take the paper out of the trash bin less than a minute after your buddy made the drop."

"So did I," said Luxford, regarding Alma with a shyly apologetic smile. "That's why I—forgive me, my dear—why I felt obliged to accost you. Don't worry, I'm sure they'll soon straighten this all out."

I certainly hope so, thought Alma, totally bewildered. They seemed to be making a ridiculous fuss about a newspaper.

Megan kept nattering on, quite as if they'd been summoned to the morgue to identify Alma's body. "You can guess what went through our minds, getting a call from the police."

Alma regarded her daughter with an innocent, reproving smile. "I know. You thought I'd been naughty again."

Roy intervened. The police had explained everything to him. "Luxford was apparently some sort of middleman. The crossword puzzle held a coded message telling him where to pick up a stolen painting. Luckily, the police had been tipped off and had the park staked out."

"I've warned you, Mother, time and again," said Megan crossly, "you're altogether too friendly with strangers. I thought you'd learned your lesson."

"Oh, but I have, dear. Indeed I have. But Mr. Luxford was such a pet, and he did share his umbrella with me. You must stop fretting about me. I think it would be better for us all if I went back to my own apartment."

Megan pursed her lips. "That's not for you to decide. Which reminds me, you'd better call Spenlove. He'll be wondering why you missed your appointment."

"All right, dear, I will. As soon as I've freshened up."

In her room, Alma fished nice Mr. Luxford's pigskin wallet from her carry-all and sat down to examine its contents, deciding the

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photo on the unfortunate man's driver's license didn't begin to do him justice. But then, did they ever? She jotted down the address. Even if Mr. Luxford wouldn't be receiving his mail there for a while, she would post it back in the morning. She always sent them back, contents intact, even if that crabby old judge had refused to accept this as proof it was only a game, a harmless lark. Could she help it if she had nimble fingers? And knitting was such a bore.

Putting the wallet aside, she decided not to change into her everyday wig. Not, that is, until she'd called her probation officer. Even on the phone, conversations with Mr. Spenlove seemed to require an air of sprightliness. Like Megan, he was such a fusspot.

ON OUR COVER

Ross Thomas is the author of over twenty political thrillers, including *The Cold War Swap,* which won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar for best first novel in 1966, and *Briarpatch,* which won the Edgar for best novel in 1984. Thomas's novels have been praised for their accurate insider's depiction of the way governments and institutions operate, as well as the dry humor of his rapid-paced narrative style.

Thomas was born in Oklahoma City and educated at the University of Oklahoma. He served as an infantryman in the Philippines during World War II. He has covered politics for a daily newspaper, handled press relations for a major trade union, managed a gubernatorial campaign, covered Europe as a foreign correspondent in Bonn, Germany, worked for a giant advertising/PR firm which sent him to handle a political campaign in Nigeria, and acted as consultant for LBJ's War on Poverty, all of which has stood him in good stead in his writing. As Thomas has put it, "I try to peg every book on a ledge of actual experience."

Thomas was the final writer to work on the screenplay for Joe Gores' *Hammett,* which was made into a movie by Francis Ford Coppola in 1983. He has also written five books under the name "Oliver Bleeck" that concern the adventures of Philip St. Ives, a professional go-between.

Ross Thomas's most recent novel is *The Fourth Durango,* published by Mysterious Press.

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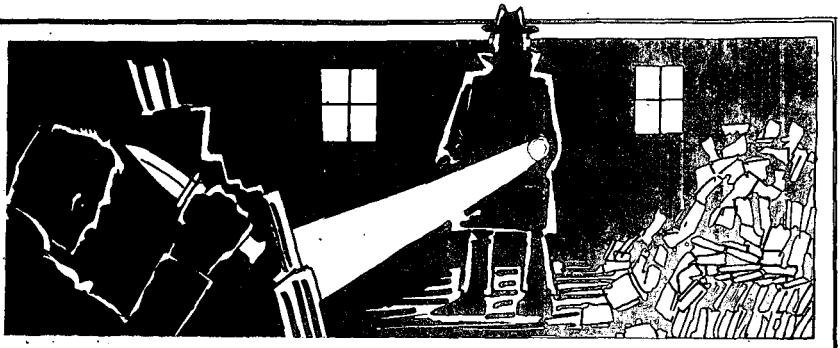

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A chilling portrait we hope readers will find more far-fetched than familiar . . .

FIRST JOB, LAST JOB

by R. V. BRANHAM

I'm bored. Having just gotten up from a ten-hour nap, I'm watching *Margie,* a jejune and bogus 1946 period film set in the Roaring Twenties (I looked it up in one of Mom's film reference tomes). This movie is so infectiously dumb, it's viral.

The phone rings. Margie. My sister (half) bouncing off a Ma Bell satellite back East in Sag Harbor. "Mark. Mom there?"

I look at a clock display. "No, she's doing overtime."

Margie, on TV, is entangled in a high-school debate.

"Know when she'll be home?"

I sigh. "No, I don't."

"Don't be so damn snotty."

"I'm not being snotty. Look, I'll tell her you called." I make a tactical preemptive phone strike and hang up.

I wish they'd hurry up and invent a good Interactive Entertainment system. I'd Interact, all right. Plant a neutron bomb in the high school. *Strike the high-school set.* I wish I had a real bomb, to plant in Sag Harbor.

"Take the Marines out of Nicaragua."

"Wha—?" I knock over my can of Jolt cola. The contents of the can slowly gurgle into my bowl of blue corn chips. The last of the blue corn chips.

The door slides, catching the rubber. Mom. In the smoked glass of the tacky plywood audio cabinet by the TV set I can see a reflection of her coming in with two bags of groceries, those biodegradable plastic bags with the handles that biodegrade before you get out to the parking lot unless the box boy triple-bags them. Sure enough, these are tearing at the seams. I'd help her out, but Mom's liberated.

"Did you pick up any blue corn chips, Mom?"

"What about the five bags I picked up this weekend?" *Snap, and*

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pop. Mom is opening the first of what will be many beers, some laced with bourbon. Before I can get a dig in about the drinking, she makes a superb preemptive strike. "Did you call the agency, Mark? And I *don't* mean that fantasy phone service you work part-time for."

"You complain about me not working—and when I do, you complain about me not working enough."

"Look, I just don't think it's particularly healthy."

"You're a prude."

Mom fixes a bead on me. She has finished her first beer and is reaching for another can, a Silver Bullet. I turn away, watching her reflection in a mirror. Ever since the divorce, ever since she stopped playing tennis, Mom's become a sort of ghost. Ghost eyes, ghost hair, and ghostly, flabby skin. And her heart's gotten flabby now, too—I read about how alcoholics sustain serious damage to their heart muscles—and she sucks on little nitro pills when she's not sucking on a glass.

She reaches for the remote control, which I've left on the wet bar.

"Mom, did you know we were in Nicaragua in 1928?"

"Yes." She palms the remote and turns off the TV. "Mark, you've had that stupid movie on twice already this week." She takes a nip of bourbon, backwashing, and then pours a jigger's worth into a tall glass. "Are you going to call the agency?"

"The line was busy." I look down at the blue corn chips floating in a pool of Jolt.

"Try it again." Mom has preheated the oven, and when the bell rings she takes a quiche from the freezer and pops it in. I had a dream last night that she had a pacemaker, that I was in the kitchen helping her, that I turned on the microwave, and that she fell flopping and gasping to the parquet floor.

"Okay, Mom."

"When, Mark?"

"Tomorrow."

"Why not *now?*"

"Okay, okay." I give her a look.

"All right, so your dad's a fascist and I'm a lush, but *you* are a dropout."

"I passed Equivalency."

"And what have you accomplished with this Equivalency of yours?"

"You and Dad are loaded."

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"Your *father* is filthy rich. I'm not too badly off, I admit, but I've worked for every bit of it. And I didn't earn it so you could become a couch potato, spilling Pepsi on your corn chips."

"It's Jolt."

"I don't care if it's Spanish Fly!"

I get up and make for the guest room, now serving as my headquarters. Mom grabs me by the shoulder, jerks me back. "You can go and pout *after* you call Kelly." She pushes me to the phone like I'm some sort of animal.

"I bet they're probably gone for the day."

"Kelly Girls closes at six."

"It's Kelly *Services,* not Girls. Do I look like a girl?"

She just grabs the phone and dials. "Hello, I'm calling for my son, Mark Murnau—he'll be on in a second. Could you connect me to Laurel? She's with someone else? We'll wait."

"Laurel?" I look at Mom. "I don't have any clean clothes."

"So put something in the washer." She hands the phone to me. "I've had it up to my eyebrows." She pauses and finishes off her beer. "You're eighteen now, Mark—you've been out of school for two years. You won't apply to a college or live with your dad on his terms—which leaves you with me and *my* terms."

I've heard enough from her, so I hang up the phone and reach for the remote, to turn the TV back on.

Mom snatches it from the wet bar. "You're not watching *Nightmare on Elm Street* for the tenth time this week! You're getting a job, or it's back to Long Island, back to your father. Back to curfews!"

I turn away, my teeth grinding. "You made your point."

"Good." Mom smiles, flashing her capped teeth and bridgework. "Dial Kelly. I'll be on the other line, so don't come up with any excuses." She shakes her head. "You haven't worked a day in your life."

"What about the phone service?"

"That's not work. And part of it's been my fault, but only part of it." She's now halfway down the hall. "I'm calling first thing tomorrow to get your name taken off the Gold card."

I'm at the corner of Manhattan Beach Boulevard and Sepulveda, waiting for the Long Beach bus. I read the top halves of the various newspapers in the newsracks. They all have articles about the Writer's Guild strike. No wonder Mom has been so obnoxious. No

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writers, no scripts. No scripts, no shows. No shows, no story editors. And no paychecks.

Damn Guild.

I guess it's just as well they're on strike, because Mom got sick two nights ago, wound up in the hospital. I suppose I shouldn't have done that to her, but she kept pulling my chain. So I went into her bedroom and replaced her nitro with saccharin or whatever they call that crud. I put the nitro back before the ambulance arrived. She was too bombed to really taste the saccharin. They're keeping her at the Little Company of Mary for a few days, for close observation. When I saw her in Emergency, she made me promise on her life to go on the Kelly assignment.

I look up the street, northward, for the bus. Mom's Volvo has been at the garage for a week now. Two old crones sit on the bench, talking about biblical prophecy, about the millennium. I push the button on my digital watch and nothing happens. I turn to one of the women and ask for the time.

"Seven-forty," one of them tells me.

I have to be at Garret Airesearch by nine. Or call Kelly if I'm going to be late.

One of the crones passes a flier to me. On it the words "secular," "Satan," "Jesus," "evil," and "Kingdom" are all misspelled. I smile at her and sit on the adjacent bench, make a paper airplane out of the flier, and toss it into the traffic.

I take out my green-plastic Kelly Services folder. My supervisor's card. Time cards. Vacation Benefits. Record of Hours. Assignment Record. Change of Address or Name. Kelly Elite. *Kelly Handbook.*

I flip the handbook open for the first time since Laurel gave it to me yesterday. A green headline: *Working with Our Customer.* With dots and subheads: Be dependable. Be responsible. Make a good impression. Be productive. Ask questions. Be businesslike. Be discreet. Leave a good impression.

How boring. If this is what a first job's like, give me the phone service. With those anonymous panting voices, it's weird, but never boring.

Eleven dollars an hour. Though I have no "office" experience, I passed Kelly's tests with flying colors and spangled banners and pinwheels. I stick the handbook back in the folder, the folder in my knapsack.

My wallet falls out and flies open. I pick it up—and notice the card Mom was going to cancel.

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A mohawked punker on a moped rides past and shouts, "Stupid bus broke down a mile back!"

I look around and see a pay phone at the gas station across the street. I'd better phone Kelly and let them know I might run late. I press the button by the crosswalk and the pedestrian signal flashes green.

As I cross, a Mazda making a sharp left goes directly into a puddle of water and splatters my grey pants and white shirt. How auspicious.

I go to the phone, take out some change, and dial the agency. The line is busy, it really is. I use the coins that drop to call Ted. Maybe he'll give me a ride, even provide me with a change of clothes—we wear the same size.

"Ted's Escort and Phone Fantasy Services. If you want to leave a message, please wait for the sound of—" I hang up.

And I look up the street. And see the bus approaching. Never trust a kid with a mohawk.

I run into the traffic. Brakes squeal and horns honk and drivers swear at me as I dart through the lanes.

"Transfer."

The driver hands me the slip and I make my way to the rear of the commuter-packed bus. Half of these people look like Mom—or, worse, like Dad.

Some thirty minutes later, I get off at Pacific Coast Highway and Hawthorne. The sun is beginning to burn off the overcast, to turn the brisk morning into a muggy day. A guy is perched on a bench with a tray of sushi. Sushi for breakfast. My stomach turns. "You waiting for the Eight, going north?" he asks me.

"Sure enough."

"Just came by four, five minutes ago." He dips the fish side into the soy sauce and horseradish and takes a bite. "Next one's due in forty, fifty minutes or so."

There's a Norm's across the street. I decide to rush in for a quick breakfast: French toast, an egg over easy, and two strips of bacon. And, of course, coffee.

After eating, I pay the tab and leave a tip. Which leaves me flat broke. But I can't leave without tipping—only sleaze buckets do that.

The next bus is headed north just as I get out the door. And gone before I've crossed the intersection.

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I go to a pay phone at the corner.

—No money.

But I've got the credit card. The nearest credit-card phone's eight blocks away, at the hotel. I'm certain there's one there. Then I think to call from here, collect.

I dial "0." And then 911. "I'd like to make a collect call for anyone at Kelly Services." I give the operator my number. "Yes, it *is* an emergency. An illness." And I give my name.

The operator dials. The operator gives Kelly my message. But they won't accept my collect call.

I walk northward on Hawthorne. When I finally reach the hotel and find a credit-card phone, I insert Mom's card and dial Kelly. "I want to talk to Laurel," I say. I listen, and go on. "I don't care if she's on another line—I need to talk to her. I just tried to call collect. Yes, Mark Murnau. What do you mean, not professional? Well, I missed the bus and had to get breakfast. You're saying this first job's my last job with you? Well, rotate, you bastards—go to hell!" They hang up before I really get going.

This is all Mom's fault!

I use the credit card for another call, to Long Island. To my fascist father. "Dad—I've thought it over—can I come back?"

The call works. I knew it would.

I'm next to Del Amo Shopping Center, the world's largest mall. With Mom's card.

I'll leave my rags at Mom's. I find a travel agency and book an afternoon flight to New York. Then I work my way across the mall, north by northeast: Tower Records, Sears, Bullocks, Montgomery Ward. After that I rent a car and drive it to LAX, where I abandon it in Lot C after accidentally sideswiping a parked BMW that was taking up too much space.

I'm giving up on first jobs, last jobs. I request a window seat, non-smoking section, at the Pan Am counter. Father the fascist will never believe Mom the lush—even if he does, I might settle with him. And I can always tamper with his insulin dosage the way I tampered with Mom's nitro. Terms can always be negotiated.

"Q"

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a distinguished reprint by

ELLERY QUEEN

To celebrate the approaching 50th anniversary of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, *we again bring you an Ellery Queen reprint, this one "The Motive," which appeared as a two-part serial in the August and September 1958 issues after its initial publication elsewhere under the title "Terror Town." The story was adapted for* Alfred Hitchcock Presents *by Leigh Brackett, retitled* Terror at Northfield, *and aired on October 11, 1963 . . .*

THE MOTIVE

by ELLERY QUEEN

Young Susan Marsh, red-haired librarian of the Flora G. Sloan Library, Northfield's cultural pride, steered the old wreck of a Buick around the stanchion blinker in the center of town and headed up Hill Street toward the red-brick Town Hall, coughing as the smoke came through the floorboards. Susan didn't mind. She had discovered that the 1940 sedan only smoked going up steep grades, and the road between town and her cottage in Burry's Hollow three miles out of Northfield, her usual route, was mostly level as a barn floor.

The vintage Buick had been given to Susan a few weeks before, in October, by Miss Flora Sloan, Northfield's undisputed autocrat and, to hear some tell it, a lineal descendant of Ebenezer Scrooge.

"But, Miss Flora," Susan had exclaimed, "why me?"

"Because all that robber Will Pease offered me on her was a measly thirty-five dollars," Miss Flora had said grimly. "I'd rather you had it for nothing."

"Well, I don't know what to say, Miss Flora. She's *beautiful*."

"Fiddledesticks," the old lady had said. "She needs a ring job, her

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tires are patchy, one headlight's broken, the paint's scrofulous, and she's stove in on the left side. But the few weeks I had her she took me where I wanted to go, Susan, and she'll take you, too. It's better than pedaling a bike six miles a day to the library and back, the way you've had to do since your father passed on." And Miss Flora had added a pinch of pepper, "It isn't as if girls wore bloomers like they used to when *I* was twenty-two."

What Miss Flora had failed to mention was that the heater didn't work, either, and with November nipping up and winter only weeks away it was going to be a Hobson's choice between keeping the windows open and freezing or shutting them and dying of asphyxiation. But right now, struggling up Hill Street in a smelly blue haze, Susan had a much more worrisome problem. Tom Cooley was missing.

Tommy was the son of a truck farmer in the valley—a towhead with red hands, big and slow-moving like John Cooley, and sorrow-eyed as his mother Sarah, who had died of pneumonia the winter before. Tommy had a hunger for reading rare in Northfield, and Susan dreamed dreams for him.

"There's not an earthly reason why you shouldn't go on to college, Tommy," Susan had told him. "You're one of the few boys in town who really deserves the chance."

Tommy had said, "Even if Pa could afford it, I can't leave him alone with the farm."

"But sooner or later you've got to leave, anyway. In a year or so you'll be going into the Army."

"I don't know what Pa'll do." And then he quietly switched the subject to books.

There was a sadness about Tommy, a premature loss of joy that made Susan want to mother him, high as he towered above her. She looked forward to his visits and their snatches of talk about Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe. Tommy's chores kept him close to the farm, but on the first Monday of every month, rain, snow, or good New England sunshine, he showed up at Susan's desk to return the armful of books she had recommended the last time and go off eagerly with a fresh supply.

But on the first Monday in November, there had been no Tommy. When he failed to appear by the end of that week, Susan was sure something was wrong, and on Friday evening she had driven out to the Cooley place. She found the weatherbeaten farmhouse locked,

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a tractor rusting in a furrow, the pumpkins and potatoes unharvested, and no sign of Tommy. Or, for that matter, of his father.

So on Saturday afternoon Susan had closed the library early, and here she was, bound up Hill Street for Deputy Sheriff Linc Pearce's office on an unhappy mission.

It had to be the county officer, because Northfield's police department was Rollie Fawcett. Old Rollie's policing had been limited for a generation to chalking tires along Main and Hill Streets and writing out overtime parking tickets for the one-dollar fines that paid his salary. There was simply no one in Northfield but Linc Pearce to turn to.

Susan wasn't happy about that, either.

The trouble was, to Linc Pearce she was still the female Peter Pan who used to dig the rock salt out of his bottom when old Mr. Burry caught them in his apples. Lengthening her skirts and having to wear bras hadn't changed Linc's attitude one bit. It wasn't as if he was immune to feminine charms—the way he carried on with that overblown Marie Fullerton just before he went into the Army had been proof enough of that. Susan had counted on the Army's taking a boy and returning a man, and in a way it had. Linc came home quieter, more settled, and he was doing a fine job as Sheriff Howland's deputy in the Northfield district. But he went right back to treating Susan as if they were still swimming raw together in Burry's Creek.

She parked the rattletrap in the space reserved for Official Cars Only and marched into Town Hall with her jaw set for anything.

Linc went to work on her right off. "Well, if it isn't Snubby Sue," he chuckled, uncoiling all six foot three of him from behind his desk. "Leave your specs home?"

"What specs?" Susan could see the twitch of a squirrel's whisker at two hundred yards.

"Last time I passed you on the street you didn't see me at all."

"I saw you, all right," Susan said coldly, and drew back like a snake. "Linc Pearce, if you start chucking me under the chin again—"

"Why, Susie," Linc said, "I'm just setting you a chair."

"Well," Susan sniffed, off-guard, "is it possible you're developing some manners?"

"Yes, ma'am," Linc said respectfully, and he swung her off the floor with one long arm and dropped her into the chair with a smack that jarred her all the way up to the teeth.

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"Someday!" Susan choked.

"Now, now," Linc said gently. "What's on your mind?"

"Tommy Cooley!"

"The silk purse you're working on?" Linc grinned, and Susan said to herself, Steady, girl. Her cultural interest in young Tom had been a source of amusement to Linc for a long time. "What's Plowboy done now—swiped a library book?"

"He's disappeared," Susan snapped—and she told Linc about Tommy's failure to show up at the library and her visit to the deserted Cooley farm.

Of course, Linc looked indulgent. "There's no mystery about John. He's been away over a month looking to buy another farm as far from Northfield as he can find. John took Sarah's death hard. But Tommy's supposed to be looking after the place."

"Well, he's not there."

Linc shrugged. "Probably took off on a toot."

"Leaving a four-thousand-dollar tractor to rust in a half plowed lot? Tommy's got too much farmer in him for that, Linc. Besides, he's not that kind."

"He's seventeen, isn't he?"

"I know Tommy Cooley, and you don't."

Linc looked at her. Then he reached for his hat and sheep-lined jacket. "I suppose I'll never hear the end of it if I don't take a look."

Out in the parking space, he walked all around Susan's recent acquisition. "I know," he said gravely. "It's John Wilkes Booth's getaway car. Where'd you dig her up?"

"Miss Flora Sloan *presented* her to me three weeks ago when she won that Chevrolet coupe at the Grange-bazaar raffle."

Linc jackknifed himself and got in. "Is it safe? The chances I have to take on this job."

He went on like that all the way into the valley. Susan drove stiffly, her cheeks smarting in the November wind. But as they turned into the Cooley yard, Linc said in an altogether different voice, "John's home. There's his jeep."

"He must have just got back, then," Susan said. "I tried phoning this morning and there was no answer."

They found John Cooley crouched in a Morris chair in his parlor, enormous shoulders at a beaten-down slope. The family Bible lay on his massive knees and he was staring into space over it. He was still dressed in his blue Sunday-meeting suit.

"Hi, John," Linc said from the doorway.

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The farmer's head came about. The bleached grey eyes were dazed. "My boy's gone, Lincoln." The voice that rumbled from his chest had trouble in it, deep trouble.

"Just heard, John."

"Ain't been home for weeks, looks like." He peered through the dimness of the parlor. "Where's Tommy at, Sue?"

"I don't know, Mr. Cooley." Susan tried to keep her voice casual. "I was hoping you did."

The farmer rose, looking around as if for a place to put the Bible. He was almost as tall as Linc and half again as broad, a tree of a man struck by lightning.

"When did you see Tom last, John?" Linc asked him.

"October the second, when I went off to look for a new place." Cooley swallowed. "Found me one down in York State, too. Figured to give Tommy a new start, maybe change our luck. But now I'll have to let it go."

"You hold your horses, John," Linc said cheerfully. "Didn't the boy leave you a note?"

"No." The farmer's breathing became noisy. He set the Bible down on the Morris chair, as if its weight were suddenly too much.

"We'll find him. Sue, you saw Tom last on the first Monday in October?"

Susan nodded. "It was October the third, I think, the day after Mr. Cooley says he left. Tommy came to the library to return some books and take out others. He had the farm truck, I remember."

"Truck still here, John?"

"Aya."

"Anything of Tom's missing?"

"His .22."

Linc looked relieved. "Well, that's it. He's gone off into the hills. He'll show up any minute with a fat buck and forty-two kinds of alibis. I wouldn't worry."

"Well, I would," Susan said. She was furious with Linc. "Tommy'd never have left on an extended hunting trip without bringing my library books back first. He knows I always give him two weeks more than the rules allow as it is."

"There's female reasoning for you," Linc grinned. But he went over to Cooley and touched the heavily muscled shoulder. "John, you want me to organize a search for him?"

The shoulder quivered under Linc's hand. But all the farmer said was, "Aya . . ."

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Overnight, Linc had three search parties formed and the state police alerted. On Sunday morning, one party, in the charge of old Sanford Brown, Northfield's first selectman, headed west with instructions to stop at every farm and gas station. Rollie Fawcett took the second, going east with identical instructions.

The third Linc took charge of himself, including in his party Frenchy Lafont and Lafont's two hounddogs. Frenchy owned the Northfield Bar & Grill across Hill Street from Town Hall. He was the ace tracker of the country.

"You take her easy, John," Lafont said to John Cooley before they set out. "Me, my dogs, we find the boy. Why you want to go along?"

But the farmer went ahead packing a rucksack as if he were deaf. Frenchy glanced at Linc and shook his head.

Linc's party disappeared into the heavily timbered country to the north, and they were gone a full week. They came back bearded, hollow-cheeked, and silent. John Cooley and Frenchy Lafont and his two hounds didn't return with them. They showed up three days later, when the first snowfall made further search useless. Even the dogs looked defeated.

Meanwhile, Linc had furnished police of nearby states with handbills giving a description of Tommy Cooley and reproducing his latest photograph—the one from his high-school yearbook. Newspapers, radio and TV stations cooperated. Linc sent an official request to Washington and the enlistment files of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force were combed. Registrars of colleges all over the country were circularized. The F.B.I. was notified.

But no trace of Tommy Cooley—or his hunting rifle—turned up.

Linc and Susan quarreled.

"It's one of those things, I tell you." The cleft between Linc's eyes was biting deep these days. "We haven't been able to fix even the approximate time of his disappearance. It could have been anytime between October third and the early part of November. Nobody saw him leave and apparently no one's seen him since."

"But a grown boy doesn't go up in smoke," Susan protested. "He's got to be *somewhere*, Linc."

"Sure," Linc said. "In Canada prospecting for uranium, or hunting Mau Maus in Kenya. Kids are pretty irresponsible characters."

"So are some grown men I know," Susan said. "Tommy did *not* run away from home, he *isn't* irresponsible, and if you were half the

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sheriff's whitehaired boy you think you are you'd find out what happened to him."

This was unreasonable, and Susan knew it. For a thrilling moment, she thought Linc was going to get mad at her, but as usual he let her down. All he said was, "How about you taking my badge, half pint, and me handing out library books?"

"Do you think you could locate the right one on the shelves?" Susan stalked out.

After the door banged, Linc got up and gently kicked it.

In mid-December, Susan drove out to the Cooley farm. The rumors about John Cooley were disturbing. He was said to be letting the farm go to seed, mumbling to himself, poring over his Bible night and day.

She found the rumors exaggerated. The house was dirty and the kitchen piled with unwashed dishes, but the farm itself seemed in good order, considering the season, and the farmer talked lucidly enough. Only his appearance shocked her. His ruddy skin had greyed and loosened, his hair had white streaks in it, and his coveralls flapped on his frame.

"I've brought you a blueberry pie I had in my freezer, Mr. Cooley," she said. "I remember Tommy saying blueberry's your favorite."

Cooley looked down at the pie in his lap, but not as if he saw it. "My Tom's a good boy."

Susan tried to think of something to say. "We've missed you at Grange meetings and church. Isn't it awfully lonesome for you here, Mr. Cooley?"

"Have to wait for the boy," Cooley explained patiently. "The Lord would never take him from me without a sign. I've had no sign, Susan. He'll come home."

"Sometimes—" Susan began. But she stopped. There was a look on the farmer's face that it would have been sheer sin to dispel. She prayed silently that the fanatical light might never have reason to go out.

But it was a vain prayer. Tommy Cooley was found in the spring.

The rains that year were biblical. They destroyed the early plantings, overflowed ponds and creeks, and sent the Northfield River over its banks to flood thousands of acres of pasture and bottomland. The main highway between Northfield and the valley was under water for several miles.

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When the waters sank, they exposed a shallow hole not two miles from the Cooley farm, just off the highway. In the hole lay the remains of Tommy Cooley. A county crew repairing the road found him.

Susan heard the tragic news as she was locking the library for the day. Frenchy Lafont, racing past in his new Ford convertible, slowed down long enough to yell, "They find the Cooley boy's body, Miss Marsh! Ever'body's goin' out!" He was gone before she could open her mouth.

How Susan got the aged Buick started in the damp twilight, how she knew where to go, she never remembered. She supposed it was instinct, a blind following of the herd of vehicles stampeding from town onto the valley road, most of them as undirected as her jalopy. All she could think of was the look on John Cooley's grey face when he said the Lord had given him no sign.

She saw the farmer's face at last, and her heart sank. Cooley was on his knees in the roadside grave, clawing in the muck, his eyes blank and terrible, while all around him people trampled the mud-slimed brush like a nest of aroused ants. Linc Pearce and some state troopers were holding the crowd back, trying to give the bereaved man a decent grieving space, but they needn't have wrestled so. The farmer might have been alone in one of his cornfields.

His big hands alternately caressed and mauled the grave's mud, as if he would coax and batter it into submission to his frenzy. Once he found a button rotted off his son's leather jacket sleeve and Linc came over and tried to take it from him, but the big hand became a fist and Linc turned away. Cooley put it into the pocket of his checkered red mackinaw along with a pebble, a chunk of glass, a clump of grass roots—these were his son, the covenant between them, Mizpah. Once he lifted a corner of the canvas that had been dropped on the body after it was lifted from the grave—peering, trying to make sense out of the jumbled clay—and for the first time Susan wept.

Afterward, when Tommy had been taken away by Art Ormsby's hearse and most of the crowd had crawled off in their cars, Susan was able to come close. They had John Cooley sitting on a stump near the grave now, while men hunted through the brush. They were merely going through the motions, Susan knew—time, the ebbing waters, the feet of the crowd would have obliterated any clue.

She waited while Linc conferred with a state-trooper lieutenant

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and Dr. Buxton, who was the coroner's physician for Northfield. She saw Dr. Buxton glance at John Cooley, shake his grey head, and get into his car to drive back to town. Then she noticed that the lieutenant was carefully holding a rusty, mud-caked rifle.

When the trooper went off with the rifle, Susan walked up to Linc and said, "Well?" They had hardly conversed all winter.

Linc squinted briefly down at her and said, "Hello, Sue." Then he looked over at the motionless man on the stump, as if the two were connected in his mind painfully.

"That rifle," Susan said. "Is it Tommy's?"

Linc nodded. "Tossed into the hole with the body. They're going to give it the once-over at the state-police lab in Gurleytown, but they won't find anything after all this time."

"How long?"

"Hard to say." Linc's firm lips set tight. "Doc Buxton thinks offhand he's been dead five or six months. Even a post mortem, he says, probably won't permit him to fix the date closer than that."

"Linc—was it murder?"

"The whole back of his head is smashed in. What else there is we won't know till Doc does the autopsy."

Susan swallowed the raw wind. It was impossible to associate that canvas-shrouded lump with Tommy Cooley's big, sad, eager self, to realize that it had been crumbling in the earth here since last October or early November.

"Who'd want to kill him?" she said fiercely. "And why, Linc? *Why?*"

"That," Linc said, "is what I have to find out."

She had never seen him so humorless, his mouth so much like a sprung trap. A wave of warmth washed over her.

"Linc, let me help," she said.

"How?" Linc asked.

The wave recoiled. There was no approaching him on an adult level, in the case of Tommy Cooley or in anything else.

"It's a man's job," Linc was mumbling. "Thanks all the same."

Susan sloshed away, trembling with fury.

In the weeks that followed, Susan kept tabs on Linc's frustration almost with satisfaction. She got most of her inside information from Dr. Buxton, who was a habitue of the library's mystery shelves, old Flora Sloan, and Frenchy Lafont. Miss Flora's all-seeing eye encompassed events practically before they took place, and Frenchy's stra-

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tegic location opposite Town Hall gave him the best-informed clientele in town.

"Linc Pearce's bellowing around like a heifer in her first season," Miss Flora remarked one day in the library. "But that boy's all fenced in, Susan. There's some things the Almighty doesn't mean for us to know. I guess the mystery of poor Tommy Cooley's one of 'em."

"I can't believe that, Miss Flora," Susan said. "If Linc is fenced in, it's only because it's such a difficult case."

The old lady cocked an eye at her. "Appears to me, Susan, you take a mighty personal interest in it."

"Well, of course! Tommy—"

"Tommy, my foot. You can fool the men folks with your straight-out talk and your red-hair temper, Susan Marsh, but you don't fool an old woman. You've been in love with Lincoln Pearce ever since I can remember. Why don't you stop this fiddling and marry him?"

"Marry him!" Susan laughed. "Of all the notions, Miss Flora. Naturally, I'm interested in Linc—we grew up together and this is an important case to him—"

"Fiddledesticks," Miss Flora said distinctly and walked out.

Frenchy Lafont said to Susan in mid-May, when she stopped into his cafe for lunch, "That Linc, he's a fool for damn sure. Ever'body but him knows he's licked."

"He's *not* licked, Mr. Lafont!" Susan assured him.

Susan saw Linc that same day. He was striding up Sanford Street toward Hill, past the library. He looked so gaunt and squeezed out, such a leaning tower of trouble, that Susan wished a great wish that he would look up, to be comforted by an old friend's smile through the doorway, which was wide open to the opportunity. But Linc passed by without a glance.

The fact was, there was nothing for Linc Pearce or anyone else to grab hold of. The dead boy's skull had been crushed from behind by a blow of considerable force, according to Dr. Buxton. His shoulders and back showed evidence of assault, too—apparently there had been a savage series of blows. But the weapon was not found.

Linc went back to the site of the shallow grave time after time to nose around in a great circle, studying the road and the brush foot by foot. But it was time wasted. Nor were the state-police technicians more successful. They could detect no clue in the dead boy's clothing or rifle. All they could say was that the rifle had not been fired, so

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that presumably the boy had been killed without warning or a chance to defend himself. Tommy's rifle had been returned to his father, along with the meaningless contents of his pockets. John Cooley had broken down then, collapsing in tears.

Linc retraced the ground covered by his November search parties, trying to find someone who might remember seeing Tommy after October third. But no one did. So even the date of the murder was a mystery.

Motive was the darkest mystery of all. It had not been robbery. Tommy's wallet, containing most of the hundred dollars his father had left with him, had been intact in the grave. Linc went into the boy's life and through his effects, questioned and requestioned his friends, his high-school teachers, and every farmer and field hand within miles of the Cooley place. But the killing remained unexplained. The boy had had no enemies, it seemed—he had crossed no one, he had been involved with no girl or woman.

"John," Linc had pleaded with Cooley, "can't you think of anything that might tell why Tommy was murdered? Anything?"

But the farmer had shaken his head and turned away, big fingers gripping his Bible. The Book was now never far from his hand. He plodded about his farm aimlessly, doing no planting, letting the machinery rust. Once a week or so, he drove into Northfield to shop in the supermarket. But he spoke to no one, and after a while no one spoke to him.

One night toward the end of May, as Susan was sitting on her porch after supper, rocking in the mild moonlight and listening to the serenade of the peepers in the pond, the headlights of a car swung into her yard and a tall familiar figure got out.

It couldn't be—but it was. Linc Pearce come to Burry's Hollow.

"Susie?"

"Well, if it isn't Lanky Linc," Susan heard herself say calmly. Her heart was thumping like an old well-pump. "Come on up."

Linc hesitated at the foot of the porch steps, fumbling with his hat. "I took a chance you'd be home. If you're busy—"

Susan smiled. "Sit down, stranger."

Linc sat down on the bottom step, facing the moon. There were lines in his lean face that Susan had never noticed before.

"How've you been?" she said.

"All right," he said impatiently, and turned around. "See here,

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Susie, it's asinine going on like this. I mean, you and me. Ever since this Cooley business started—"

"It started a long time before that," Susan retorted, "and I'd rather not discuss it. But what *about* the Cooley case?"

"Susie—"

"The Cooley case," Susan said. "Or do I go to bed?"

Linc almost said something sharp. But then he shut his mouth and scowled into the blackness of the willow grove bordering Susan's pond. "What do you want me to say? There's nothing to tell."

"Nothing at all?"

"It's hopeless. It'll never be solved."

"Because you haven't been able to solve it?"

"Me or anybody else," Linc said. "It's one of those crimes that makes no sense because it never had any. Our theory now is that Tommy was attacked on the road by some psychopathic tramp, who buried him in a hurry and lit out for other parts."

"In other words, the most convenient theory possible."

"It happens all the time."

"And suppose it wasn't a psychopathic tramp?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think it was somebody in Northfield."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

"I don't know that, either."

Linc laughed.

"I think you'd better go, Linc."

"Now, Susie—"

The phone rang in the house, and Susan stamped inside.

"It's for you, Linc," she called out to him coolly. "The bartender over at Frenchy Lafont's."

"Bib Hadley? I should have known better than to tell Bib I was stopping in here on my way home," Linc growled, unfolding himself from the step. "Some drunk acting up, I suppose."

Inside, he picked up the receiver. "What is it, Bib?" He listened. "I'll get right on out there, Bib," he said and hung up. Something in the way he said it made Susan ask, "What's the matter?"

"Another murder," he said.

An icy hand seized her heart. "Who, Linc? Where?"

"Frenchy Lafont." Linc's voice sounded thick. "Some kids out in

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a hot rod found his body just off the valley road. The whole back of his head is caved in."

"Like Tommy Cooley," Susan whispered.

"I'll say like Tommy Cooley," Linc said. "Bib says they found Frenchy lying in the exact spot where we dug up Tommy's body."

The valley road was a wild mess of private cars and jeeps and farm trucks. As Linc and Susan wormed past, Linc had to keep his siren going all the way.

We're scared witless, Susan thought. She almost said it aloud, but one look at Linc and she did not.

Two state-police cars had set up roadblocks near the site of the new horror. Linc plowed onto the soft shoulder and skidded around into the cleared space. The road in both directions was a double string of lights. Everywhere Susan looked, people were jumping out of cars and running along the road. In a twinkling, the fifty feet of highway between the roadblocks was rimmed with eyes. Susan suddenly recalled a hunting trip with her father when she was eleven years old. They had pitched camp for the night in a clearing in the dense woods, and her father had had to build the fire up when she became frightened at the glittering holes in the black wall of the unknown surrounding them. For years afterward, she'd had nightmares in which a ring of fiercely glowing little planets closed in on her from outer space.

But this was worse. This was the menace of the known. Old neighbors, good people, transformed into a curious, hostile mob.

Susan peered at what lay just off the road on the north side. It sprang at her, brutally detailed, in the police flares. She jerked back, hiding her eyes.

She was to remember that photographic flash for the rest of her life. The mound of sandy earth where the grave had been refilled after the removal of Tommy Cooley's body, pebbled, flint-spangled, scabby with weeds—and, across it, as on one of Art Ormsby's biers, the flung remains of what had been Frenchy Lafont.

Susan couldn't see his wound—she could only imagine what it looked like. They had turned him over, so that his face was tilted sharply back to the stars. It didn't look the least bit like Frenchy Lafont's face. Frenchy's face had been dark and vivid, lively with mischief, with beautiful lips over white teeth and a line of vain black moustache. This face looked like old suet. The mouth was a gaping black cavern, the eyes stared like dusty pieces of glass.

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"Just like the Cooley kid," one of the troopers was saying. "Just like."

His voice raised a deep echo, like a faroff growl of thunder. There was more than fear in the growl—there was anger, and, under the anger, hate. The troopers and Linc looked around, startled.

"Sounds like trouble, Pearce," one of the older troopers muttered to Linc. "They're your people. Better do something."

Linc walked off toward one of the police cars. For a moment Susan almost ran after him—she felt as if she had been left standing naked in the flares.

But the eyes were not on her.

Linc vaulted to the hood of the car and flung his arms wide. The rumble died. Susan couldn't decide which was more terrifying, their noise or their silence.

"Neighbors, I knew Frenchy Lafont all my life," Linc said in a quiet way. "Most of you did, too. There isn't a man or woman in Northfield wants more to identify the one who did this and see that he gets what's coming to him. But we can't do it this way. We'll find Frenchy's killer if you'll only go home and give us a chance."

"Like you found the killer of my boy?"

It was John Cooley's hoarse voice. He was near the west roadblock, standing tall in his jeep, his thick arm with the flail of fist at the end like a wrathful judgment. Linc turned to face him.

"Go home, John," he said gently.

"Yeah, John, go home!" a shrill voice yelled from behind the other barrier. "Go home and get yourself murdered like Tommy was!"

"That's not helping, Wes Bartlett," Linc said. "Use your head, man—"

But his voice went down under a tidal wave.

"We want protection!"

"Who's next on the list?"

"Long as *he's* deputy—"

"Resign, Pearce!"

"New sheriff's what we need!"

In the roar of the crowd, the clatter of Linc's badge on the hood of the police car was surprisingly loud.

"All right, there's my badge!" Linc shouted. "Now who's the miracle man thinks he can do the job better? I'll recommend him to Sheriff Howland myself. Come on, don't be bashful! Speak up!"

He gave them glare for glare. The glares dimmed, the answering

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silence became uneasy. Something embarrassed invaded the night air.

"Well?" Linc demanded.

Somewhere down the line, a car engine started.

Ten minutes later, except for a cluster of cars around the roadblocks, the highway was empty and dark.

Linc jumped off the police car, reached for his badge, and went over to the troopers.

"Nice going, Sheriff," Susan murmured.

But he strode past her to the edge of the burial mound, rockhard and bitter. "Let's get to it," he told the men.

At first they thought it had been a murder in the course of a robbery. Frenchy's wallet was found untouched on the body, but an envelope with the day's cafe receipts, which he had been known to have on him earlier in the evening, was missing. The robbery theory collapsed overnight. The envelope of money was found in the night depository box of the First National Bank of Northfield on Main Street when old Sanford Brown, first vice-president of the bank, unlocked the box in the morning.

The weapon was not found.

It *was* the Tommy Cooley case all over again.

Everything about the cafe owner's murder was baffling. He was a bachelor who lived with his aged mother on the old Lafont place off the valley road, a mile out of town. His elder brother, a prosperous merchant in Quebec, hadn't heard from him in months. The brother, in town to make the funeral arrangements and take charge of the mother, could shed no light on the mystery. Old Mrs. Lafont knew nothing; she spoke little English, was acquainted with few of her son's associates, and couldn't even say whether or not he had been home that evening. He always ate dinner at the cafe, and she had gone to bed early.

On the evening of his murder, Lafont had left the cafe shortly before nine, alone, taking the day's receipts with him and driving off in his new Ford. An hour or so later, he was dead some six miles out of town, on the site of the Cooley tragedy. His car was found near the mound. It was towed into the police garage at the Gurleytown barracks and gone over by experts. It yielded nothing but Frenchy's fingerprints. No blood, no indication of a struggle, no clue of any kind. The fuel tank was almost full.

"He dropped the envelope into the slot at the bank," Linc told

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Susan, "stopped in at Howie Grebe's gas station to fill up, and drove off west on the valley road. He must have gone straight to his death. There's nothing to show that he was waylaid and held up—nothing was taken, and Frenchy didn't touch the pistol he carried in his glove compartment. Bib Hadley says he was his usual wisecracking self when he left the cafe, and Howie Grebe says the same thing."

"You think he had a date with somebody he knew?" Susan asked.

"Well, Hadley says he got a phone call at the cafe," Linc said, "about eight o'clock that night."

"I hadn't heard that. Who phoned him, Linc?"

"Bib doesn't know. Frenchy answered the call himself, and he didn't say."

"Did Bib overhear anything?"

"No."

"Was Frenchy excited, concerned—alarmed?"

"Bib didn't notice anything unusual. The call might have had nothing to do with the case."

"Maybe it was some woman Frenchy was fooling with. I've heard stories about him and Logan Street." Logan Street was a part of Northfield a respectable girl seldom mentioned to the opposite sex.

"So far all alibis have stood up." Linc passed his hand over his eyes. "It's no good thinking, theorizing. I have to *know*, Sue, and there's not a fact I can sink my teeth into."

"But there's got to be a reason for a man getting the back of his head knocked in. *Why* was Frenchy murdered? *Why* was his body dumped on the same spot where the murderer buried Tommy? You can hardly say it was another psychopathic tramp, Linc."

"Maybe it was the same one."

"Oh, rot."

Linc looked at her in a persecuted way. He was glassy-eyed with exhaustion. "Could be. Only there doesn't seem to be any more sense in Frenchy's death than in Tom Cooley's. Look, Susie, I've got work to do, and talk won't help me do it."

Northfield was a strange town these days. People came in to shop, exchange tight greetings, and go swiftly home. A PTA dance scarcely met expenses. The 4-H Club canceled a fair at the order of some parents. At night the deserted streets were patroled by state-police cars Northfield had never seen when it was murder-free.

Burry's Hollow took on a sinister shape. Susan, who had been born there and had a pet name for every tree and boulder, found

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herself locking the cottage doors at night. Monsters lurked in every berry patch and clump of willows, great featureless things armed with clubs. She tossed restlessly in bed night after night, asking herself why Tommy had been killed, why Frenchy had followed him in death? What was the connection between the two? And—the most frightening question of all—would there be a next victim?

A week after Lafont's murder, Susan was waiting at the cafe entrance when Bib Hadley came to open up.

"You must hanker after a cup of my coffee real bad, Miss Marsh," the bartender said, unlocking the door. "Come on in. I'll have the urn going in a jiffy."

"What I want, Bib, is information," Susan said grimly. "I'm sick of moping around, waiting to get my head bashed in."

The bartender tied a clean apron around his ample middle. "Seems like every Tom, Dick, and Mary between Northfield and Boston's been in for the same reason. Even had a newspaperman in yesterday from one of the city wire services. Made a special trip just to pump ol' Bib. So get your two cents' worth in now, Miss Marsh, while Frenchy's brother makes up his mind what to do with this place. What do you want to know?"

"The connection between Tommy Cooley and Frenchy Lafont," Susan said.

"Wasn't any," Bib said. "Next?"

"But there must have been, Bib! Did Tommy ever work for Mr. Lafont?"

"Nope."

"Did Tommy ever come in here?"

"Tell you the truth, Miss Marsh," the bartender said, lighting the gas under the urn, "I don't believe Frenchy would have known young Tom Cooley if he'd tripped over him in broad daylight. You know how Frenchy was about teenagers. He'd stand 'em all treat over at Tracy's ice-cream parlor, but he wouldn't let 'em come in here even for coffee. Gave a good bar a bad name, he used to say."

"There had to be a connection between Tommy and Frenchy," Susan said positively, "and these murders won't be solved until it's found."

"And you're going to find it, I suppose, Sue?"

Susan jumped. There he was in the cafe doorway, looking like Gary Cooper in an emotional moment. "I saw you ambush Bib from my office window," Linc said bitterly. "Don't you trust me to ask the right questions, either?"

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I don't know why I'm feeling guilty, Susan thought furiously. This is a free country!

"We stopped playing tag in your dad's barn long ago, Sue," Linc said. "When are you going to grow up?"

"I've grown up! I've *grown* up, Linc—and everybody knows it but you!" Susan screamed. "Do we really have to stand here screaming in front of people?"

"I'm not people," Bib said. "I ain't even here."

"Nobody's screaming but you," Linc pointed out. And Susan fled past Linc to her jalopy and drove off down Hill Street with the gas pedal to the floor.

Two nights later, the body of Flora Sloan was found by a motorcycle trooper just off the valley highway, the back of her head battered in. As in the case of Frenchy Lafont, the old lady's body had been tossed onto Tommy Cooley's winter grave.

Flora Sloan had attended a vestry meeting in Christ Church, at which certain parish and financial problems had been argued. As usual, Miss Flora dominated the debate and, as usual, she got her way. She had left the meeting in lively spirits when it broke up just before ten o'clock, climbed into her Chevrolet, waved triumphantly at Sanford Brown, who had been her chief antagonist at the meeting, and driven off. Presumably, she had been bound for the big Sloan house on the western edge of town. But she never reached it—or rather, she had bypassed it, for the valley road ran by her property.

When her body was found shortly before midnight by the motorcycle trooper, she had been dead about an hour.

Had Flora picked someone up, someone who had forced her to drive to the lonely spot six miles from town and there murdered her? The old lady had been famous for her dislike of tramps and her suspicion of hitchhikers. She had never been known to give a stranger a lift.

Her purse, money untouched, was found beside her body. A valuable ruby brooch, a Sloan family heirloom, was still pinned to her blue-lace dress. The Chevrolet was parked near the grave in almost the identical spot on which Frenchy Lafont's Ford had been abandoned. There were no fingerprints in the car except her own, no clues in the car or anywhere in the vicinity of the grave.

Three nights after her murder, Sanford Brown called a special town meeting. The city fathers, lean old Yankee farmers and businessmen, sat down behind the scarred chestnut table in the Town

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Hall meeting room under an American flag like a panel of hanging judges, and among them sat County Sheriff Howland and his local deputy, Lincoln Pearce.

It was an oppressive night, and the overflow crowd made the room suffocating. Old ladies Susan Marsh hadn't seen since Election Day were there in choker-collared force. Susan saw Dr. Buxton, Art Ormsby, Howie Grebe, Will Pease, Bib Hadley, Frenchy Lafont's Canadian brother, old Mrs. Lafont in rigid mourning. She saw everyone she knew and some faces she had forgotten.

Sanford Brown rapped his gavel hard on the table. A profound silence greeted him.

"Under the authority vested in me," old Brown said rapidly through his nose, "I call this town meetin' to order. As this is special, we will dispense with the usual order of business and get right to it. Sheriff Howland's come down from the county seat at the selectmen's request. Floor's yours, Sheriff."

Sheriff Howland was a large, perspiring man in a smart city suit and a black string tie. He got to his feet, drying his bald head with a sodden handkerchief.

"Friends," he said, "when I was elected to office in this county I looked for the best man I could find to be my deputy in your district. I asked around and about and was told there wasn't finer deputy material in Northfield than young Lincoln Pearce. I want you and him to know I have every confidence in his ability to discharge the duties of his office. Linc, you tell the good folks what you told me today."

The buck having been deftly passed to him, Linc rose. His blue eyes were mourning-edged and he was so pale that Susan bled for him.

"I'm no expert on murder, never claimed to be one," Linc began in a matter-of-fact voice, but Susan could see his knuckles whiten on the edge of the table. "However, I've had the help of the best technical men of the state police and they're as high up a tree as the 'coon of this piece—and that's me.

"Three people have been beaten to death," Linc said. "One was a boy of seventeen, son of a dirt farmer, quiet boy, Congregationalist, never in trouble. One was a bar-and-grill owner, French-Canadian descent, Roman Catholic, one of the most popular men in town. The third was the last survivor of the family that founded Northfield—a rich woman, tight-fisted, some said, but we all know her many generosities. She just about ran Northfield all her life. She was a pillar

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of Christ Episcopal Church, on every important committee, with her finger in every community pie.

"Their bodies were found in the same spot. So their deaths have to be connected in some way. But how? There doesn't seem to be any answer—at least, we haven't been able to find one so far.

"We know nothing about Tommy Cooley's death because of the months that passed before we found his body. Frenchy Lafont was probably lured to his death by a phone call from somebody he knew and wasn't afraid of. Flora Sloan probably picked her killer up as she left the church meeting, which she wouldn't have done unless it was someone she knew. Tommy's clothing was too far gone to tell us anything, and the rains this spring wiped out any clues that might have been left in his case. But we found dirt on the knees of Frenchy's trousers and on Flora's skirt, so maybe Tommy was made to kneel on that spot just like Frenchy and Miss Flora afterward—and hit from behind a killing blow.

"That's all we have," Linc said. "No connection among the three victims—not one. No motive. No gain. Nothing was taken in any of the three cases far as we know. Tommy had nothing to leave anybody, Frenchy's business and house he left to his eighty-one-year-old mother, and now we're told that Flora willed her entire estate to charity. *No motive.*

"When someone kills for no reason, he's insane. Three people died because a maniac is loose in our town. It's the only answer that makes sense. If anyone here has a better, for God's sake let's all hear it."

Now the noise came back like a rising wind, and Sanford Brown banged it back to silence.

"I want to say one more thing." Susan heard Linc's pride take stubborn voice again. "I'm not going to hand over my badge unless Sheriff Howland asks for it. Want it, Sheriff?"

The sheriff squirmed. "No, Linc, of course not—unless the good folks of Northfield feel—"

Poor Linc, Susan thought. Here it comes.

She caught up with him on the steps of the Town Hall.

"Hello, Susie," he said with a stiffish grin. "Come after me to watch me digest crow?"

"Committee of Safety," Susan said bitterly. "What do *they* expect him to do, walk into their arms? Linc, *please* let me help. You're not

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beaten yet. Let's you and I talk it over. There must be something you missed! Maybe if we put our heads together—"

"You know something?" Linc put his hands about her waist. "All of a sudden I want to kiss you. But as far as the other thing is concerned, my answer's got to be the same. They can make up all the committees they want—this is my job and I'll do it by myself or go bust."

Linc sat in his office long after the last selectman had gone and Rollie Fawcett had darkened the building. He was blackly conscious of the thunderstorm that had sprung up. The rain lashing his windows seemed fitting and proper.

There must be something you missed.

Linc was irritated more by the source of the phrase going round in his head than by its persistence.

But suppose she's right?

The thought was like his collar, chafing him raw.

What *could* he have missed? What? What hadn't he followed up? He'd been over the three cases a hundred times. He couldn't possibly have missed anything. Or had he?

Linc finally saw it, appropriately enough, during a flash of lightning. The bare office with its whitewashed walls for an instant became bright as day, and in that flash of illumination Linc remembered what he had missed.

It had happened on that first night of the long nightmare—the night Tommy Cooley's body had been found washed out of its roadside grave by the receding waters of the spring flood. John Cooley had been kneeling in the grave, his hands scrabbling in the mud for some keepsake of his son. The pitiful little things he had found and tucked away in the pocket of his checkered red mackinaw.

Suppose one of those things, unknown to Cooley, had been a clue?

Linc grabbed a slicker and ran.

The Cooley farmhouse was dark. Linc turned off his lights and ignition, skin prickling at some danger he could not define.

The rain had turned into a tropical downpour. Lightning tore the sky open in quick bursts, like cannon salvos, lighting up the shade-drawn windows, the porch with the rickety rocking chairs turned to the wall, the open door of the nearby garage.

John Cooley's jeep was not in the garage.

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Linc reached for a flashlight and jumped out of his car. He splashed over to the garage and swung his light about. Yes, the farm truck was here, but the jeep was out.

Linc relaxed. He hadn't noticed John Cooley at the town meeting, but he must have been there. If he was, with a committee of safety forming, he'd surely be one of the men to be staked out in the brush near Tommy's grave. Linc went up onto the porch and tried the door. It wasn't locked, and he opened it and stepped into the hall.

"John?" No one answered. Linc went upstairs and looked into the bedrooms. They were empty.

He went back to John Cooley's old-fashioned bedroom and played his flash about. Of course, the chifforobe. He opened the doors. It was filled with winter garments.

And there was the red mackinaw.

Linc breathed a prayer and put his hand into the right pocket.

They were still there. He took them out, one by one, carefully turning them over in his fingers. The button from young Tom's rotted leather jacket. A pebble. A chunk of dirt-crusted glass.

The piece of glass!

It was thick, ridged glass with a curve to it, a roughly triangular piece cracked off from something larger. It was—it was—

My God, Linc thought.

He went over it again and again, refusing to believe it could be that simple. The answer to the murders that had happened. The warning of the murder that was going to happen.

The murder of Susan Marsh.

Of Sue!

Linc never knew how he got out of the house.

Susan had gone to bed swollen-eyed. But she had been unable to sleep. The mugginess, the storm, the thunder crashes, the lightning bolts bouncing off the pond made the night hideous. She had never felt so alone.

She crept out of bed, got into a robe, and pattered about, clicking switches. She put on every light in the house. Then she went into her parlor and sat there listening to the storm.

Her first thought when the crash came and the curtains began blowing about and a cold spray hit her bare feet was that the gale had blown the front door loose.

But then John Cooley stood in her splintered doorway. He had

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Tommy's hunting rifle cradled in his arm and in the farmer's eyes Susan saw her death.

"They're watching at the grave," Cooley said. His voice was all cracked and high, not like his bass at all. "So I can't take you there."

"*You* killed them," Susan said.

"Get down on your knees, girl," Cooley said.

He was insane. She saw that now. He had been tottering on the brink ever since Tommy's disappearance—his only son, the child of his beloved Sarah. And he had toppled over when the body was found. Only no one had seen it—not Linc, not she, not anyone.

Linc, Linc.

"Not Tommy," Susan whispered. "I know you didn't kill Tommy, Mr. Cooley."

The farmer sank into the tapestried chair near the door, the rain beating in on him. "*You* killed him, Susan Marsh," he wept.

"*No!*" Susan cried.

"You or the Frenchy or the old woman! I knew from the hunk of glass in his grave. A hunk of headlight glass. Headlight from an old auto. He was run over on the road, hit by an auto from the back—from the *back*. You killed him with an auto and you put him in a dirty hole and piled dirt on him and you ran away. You, or the Frenchy, or the old woman."

Susan wet her lips. "The Buick," she said. "My old Buick."

John Cooley looked up, suddenly cunning. "I found it! Didn't think I would, hey? I looked all over Northfield and I found the auto it come from. I looked for a smashed headlight, and the auto the old woman gave you was the one the hunk of glass fitted. Was it you run Tommy over? Or the old woman, who run the car before you? Or the Frenchy, who owned the Buick before the old woman?"

"Frenchy Lafont sold that car to Flora Sloan in October?" Susan gasped.

"Didn't think I'd track that down, hey?" John Cooley said with a sly chuckle. "Aya! Lafont sold it to the old woman when he bought his new Ford. And she gave it to you a couple of weeks later when she won a Chevrolet at the Grange bazaar. I tracked it all down. I was careful to do proper justice." His eyes began to start again and he whimpered, "But which one, which one? I didn't know which one of you killed Tommy in October, because nobody knows what day in October he was run over! So I got to kill all three of you. That way the Lord's vengeance is mine. The wrath. With the boy's gun.

"I phoned that Lafont and I says meet me at the grave, I have to

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talk to you. I walked into the town and I waited for the old woman to come out of the church, and I stopped her and made her drive out to the grave. 'Pray, Flora Sloan,' I says, 'get down on your murdering knees, sinner, and pray for your damned soul,' I says. And then I used the Lord's gun on her."

The room was shimmering.

John Cooley was on his feet, the great eyes shining.

"Pray, Susan Marsh," he thundered. "Down on your knees, girl, and pray."

Now the steel hand was at the back of her neck, forcing her to her knees.

The last thing Susan saw as she strained against the paralyzing clutch on her neck was that exultant face, terrible in triumph, and the rusty blood-caked butt of the rifle held high above it.

She fainted just as Linc Pearce plunged into the room and hurled himself at the madman.

Susan opened her eyes. She was in her own bed, Linc's long face close to hers.

"What did you say?" she murmured.

"I said I love you, Susie."

They never did find out which one had accidentally run Tommy Cooley over—Frenchy LaFont or old Miss Flora. They argued about it for years.

Editor's Note: In the TV version of the story, Linc (played by Dick York) tells Cooley at the end that Frenchy LaFont confessed to killing Tommy in his last will and testament.

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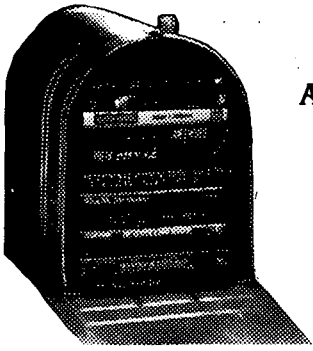

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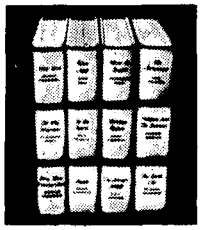

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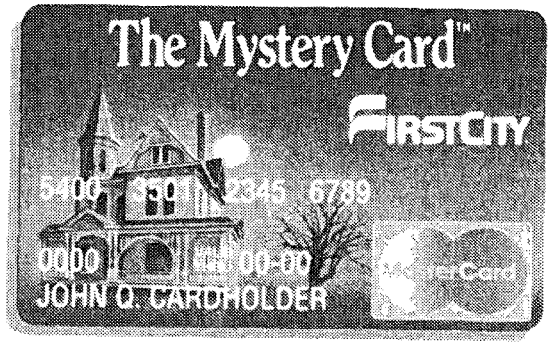

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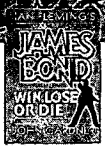

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